The White Hands

and Other Weird Tales

by

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This book is dedicated to my mother.

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You may remember Alfred Muswell, whom devotees of the weird tale will know as the author of numerous articles on the subject of literary ghost stories. He died in obscurity just over a year ago.

Muswell had been an Oxford don for a time, but left the cloisters of the University after an academic scandal. A former student (now a journalist) wrote of him in a privately published memoir:

> *Muswell attempted single-handedly to alter the academic criteria of excellence in literature. He sought to eradicate what he termed the 'tyranny of materialism and realism' from his teaching. He would loom over us in his black robes at lectures and tutorials, tearing prescribed and classic books to shreds with his gloved hands, urging us to read instead work by the likes of Sheridan Le Fanu, Vernon Lee, M.R. James and Lilith Blake. Muswell was a familiar sight amongst the squares and courtyards of the colleges at night and would stalk abroad like some bookish revenant. He had a very plump face and a pair of circular spectacles. His eyes peered into the darkness with an indefinable expression that could be somewhat disturbing.*

You will recall that Muswell's eccentric theories about literature enjoyed a brief but notorious vogue in the 1950s. In a series of essays in the short-lived American fantasy magazine *The Necrophile*, he championed the supernatural tale. This was at a time when other academics and critics were turning away from the genre in disgust, following the illiterate excesses of pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*. Muswell argued that the anthropocentric concerns of realism had the effect of stifling the much more profound study of infinity. Contemplation of the infinite, he contended, was the faculty that separated man from beast. Realism, in his view, was the literature of the prosaic. It was the quest for the hidden mysteries, he contended, which formed the proper subject of all great literature. Muswell also believed that literature, in its highest form, should unravel the secrets of life and death. This latter concept was never fully explained by him but he hinted that its attainment would involve some actual alteration in the

structure of reality itself. This, perhaps inevitably, led to him being dismissed in academic circles as a foolish mystic.

After his quiet expulsion from Oxford, Muswell retreated to the lofty heights of Highgate. From here, the London village that had harboured Samuel Taylor Coleridge during the final phase of his struggle against opium addiction, Muswell continued his literary crusade. A series of photographs reproduced in the fourth issue of *The Necrophile* show Muswell wandering through the leafy streets of Highgate clad in his black three-piece suit, cigarette jammed between lips, plump and bespectacled. In one of his gloved hands is a book of ghost stories by the writer he most admired, Lilith Blake. This Victorian author is perhaps best known for her collection of short stories, *The Reunion and Others*. Then, as now, fabulously rare, this book was printed in an edition of only one hundred copies. Amongst the cognoscenti, it has acquired legendary status. Muswell was undoubtedly the greatest authority on her life and works. He alone possessed the little that remained of her extant correspondence, as well as diaries, photographs and other personal effects.

In moving to Highgate, Muswell was perhaps most influenced by the fact that Blake had been resident in the village for all of the twenty-two years of her brief life. Her mortal remains were interred in the old West Cemetery in Swains Lane.

I first met Alfred Muswell after writing a letter to him requesting information about Lilith Blake for an article I was planning on supernatural writers of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After an exchange of correspondence he suggested that we should meet one afternoon in the reading room of the Highgate Literary and Scientific Institution. From there he would escort me to his rooms, which, apparently, were difficult to find without help, being hidden in the maze of narrow brick passageways beyond Pond Square.

It was a very cold, clear winter afternoon when I alighted at the Underground station in Highgate and made my way up Southwood Lane towards its village. Snow had fallen since the night before and the lane was almost deserted. Only the sound of my footsteps crunching in the brittle snow broke the silence. When I reached the village I paused for a while to take in my surroundings. The Georgian houses were cloaked in white and glittered in the freezing sunshine. A sharp wind blew chilly gusts across the

sagging roofs and chimney pots. One or two residents, clad in great-coats and well muffled, plodded warily along.

I accosted one of these pedestrians and was directed by him towards the Institute. This was a whitewashed structure, two floors high, facing the square on the corner of Swains Lane. I could see the glow of a coal fire within and a plump man reading in an easy chair through one of the ground floor windows. It was Alfred Muswell.

After dusting the snow-flakes from my clothes, I made my way inside and introduced myself to him. He struggled out of his chair, stood upright like a hermit crab quitting its shell, and threw out a gloved hand for me to grasp. He was dressed in his habitual black suit, a cigarette drooping from his bottom lip. His eyes peered at me intensely from behind those round glasses. His hair had thinned and grown white since the photographs in *The Necrophile*. The loss of hair was mainly around the crown, giving him a somewhat monkish appearance.

I hung up my duffel-coat and scarf and sat down in the chair facing him.

'We can sit here undisturbed for a few more minutes at least,' he said, 'the other members are in the library attending some lecture about that charlatan, James Joyce.'

I nodded as if in agreement, but my attention was fixed on Muswell's leather gloves. He seemed always to wear them. He had worn a similar pair in *The Necrophile* photographs. I noticed the apparent emaciation of the hands and long fingers that the gloves concealed. His right hand fidgeted constantly with his cigarette while the fingers of his left coiled and uncoiled repeatedly. It was almost as if he were uncomfortable with the appendages.

'I'm very pleased to talk with a fellow devotee of Lilith Blake's tales,' he said, in his odd, strained voice.

'Oh, I wouldn't describe myself as a devotee. Her work is striking, of course, but my own preferences are for Blackwood and Machen. Blake seems to me to lack balance. Her world is one of unremitting gloom and decay.'

Muswell snorted at my comment. He exhaled a great breath of cigarette smoke in my direction and said:

'Unremitting gloom and decay? Rather say that she makes desolation glorious! I believe that De Quincey once wrote "Holy was the grave. Saintly its darkness. Pure its corruption." Words that describe Lilith Blake's

work perfectly. Machen indeed! That red-faced old coot with his deluded Anglo-Catholic rubbish! The man was a drunken clown obsessed by sin. And Blackwood? Pantheistic rot that belongs to the Stone Age. The man wrote mainly for money and he wrote too much. No, no. Believe me, if you want the truth beyond the frontier of appearances it is to Lilith Blake you must turn. She never compromises. Her stories are infinitely more than mere accounts of supernatural phenomena . . .'

His voice had reached a peak of shrillness and it was all I could do not to squirm in my chair. Then he seemed to regain his composure and drew a handkerchief across his brow.

'You must excuse me. I have allowed my convictions to ruin my manners. I so seldom engage in debate these days that when I do I become overexcited.' He allowed himself to calm down and was about to speak again when a side door opened and a group of people bustled into the room. They were chatting about the Joyce lecture that had evidently just finished. Muswell got to his feet and made for his hat and overcoat. I followed him.

Outside, in the cold afternoon air, he looked back over his shoulder and crumpled up his face in a gesture of disgust.

'How I detest those fools,' he intoned.

We trudged through the snow, across the square and into a series of passageways. Tall buildings with dusty windows pressed upon us from both sides and, after a number of twists and turns, we reached the building that contained Muswell's rooms. They were in the basement and we walked down some well-worn steps outside, leaving the daylight above us.

He opened the front door and I followed him inside.

Muswell flicked on the light switch and a single bulb suspended from the ceiling and reaching halfway towards the bare floor revealed the meagre room. On each of the walls were long bookcases stuffed with volumes. There was an armchair and footstool in one corner along with a small, circular table on which a pile of books teetered precariously. A dangerous-looking Calor gas fire stood in the opposite corner. Muswell brought another chair (with a canvas back and seat) from an adjoining room and invited me to sit down. Soon afterwards he hauled a large trunk from the same room. It was extremely old and bore the monogram 'L.B.' on its side. He unlocked the trunk with some ceremony, and then sat down, lighting yet another cigarette, his eyes fixed on my face.

I took a notebook from my pocket and, drawing sheaves of manuscripts from the trunk, began to scan them. It seemed dark stuff, and rather strange, but just what I needed for the article. And there was a mountain of it to get through. Muswell, meanwhile, made a melancholy remark, apropos of nothing, the significance of which I did not appreciate until much later.

'Loneliness,' he said, 'can drive a man into mental regions of extreme strangeness.'

I nodded absently. I had found a small box and, on opening it, my excitement mounted. It contained a sepia-coloured photographic portrait of Lilith Blake, dated 1890. It was the first I had seen of her, and must have been taken just before her death. Her beauty was quite astonishing.

Muswell leaned forward. He seemed to be watching my reaction with redoubled interest.

Lilith Blake's raven-black and luxuriant hair curled down to her shoulders. Her face was oval, finished with a small pointed chin. The eyes, wide-apart and piercing, seemed to gaze across the vastness of the time which separated us. Her throat was long and pale, her forehead rounded and stray curls of hair framed the temples. The fleshy lips were slightly parted and her small, sharp teeth gleamed whitely. Around her neck hung a string of pearls and she wore a jet-black, velvet dress. The most delicate and lovely white hands I had ever seen were folded across her bosom. Although the alabaster skin of her face and neck was extremely pale, her hands were paler. They were whiter than the purest snow. It was as if daylight had never touched them. The length of her graceful fingers astonished me.

I must have sat there for some time in silent contemplation of that intoxicating image. Muswell, becoming impatient, finally broke my reverie in a most violent and unnecessary manner. He snatched the photograph from me and held it in the air while he spoke, his voice rising to a feverish pitch:

'Here is the hopeless despair of one haunted by the night. One who had gone down willingly into the grave with a black ecstasy in her heart instead of fear!'

I could only sit there in stunned silence. To me, Muswell seemed close to a complete nervous breakdown.

***

Later, Muswell must have helped me to sort through the various papers in the trunk. I remember little of the detail. I do know that by the time I finally left his rooms and found my way back to the square through the snow, I had realised that my research into Blake's work would be of the utmost importance to my academic career. Muswell had treasure in his keeping, a literary gold mine, and, given the right handling, it could make my name.

After that, my days were not my own. Try as I might, I could not expunge the vision of Blake from my mind. Her face haunted my thoughts, beckoning me onwards in my quest to discover the true meaning of her work. The correspondence between myself and Muswell grew voluminous as I sought to arrange a time when I would be enabled to draw further on his collection. For a while he seemed to distrust my mounting interest, but at last he accepted my enthusiasm as genuine. He welcomed me as a kindred spirit. By a happy chance, I even managed to rent a room in his building.

And so, during the course of the winter months, I shut myself away with Muswell, poring over Blake's letters and personal effects. I cannot deny that the handling of those things began to feel almost sacrilegious. But as I read the letters, diaries and notebooks I could see that Muswell had spoken only the truth when he described Blake as supreme in the field of supernatural literature.

He would scuttle around his library like a spider, climbing step-ladders and hauling out volumes from the shelves, passing them down through the gloomy space to me. He would mark certain passages which he believed furthered a greater understanding of Blake's life and work. Outside, the frequent snow-showers filled the gap between his basement window and the pavement above with icy whiteness. My research was progressing well; my notebook filling up with useful quotations and annotations, but somehow I felt that I was failing to reach the essence of Lilith; the most potent aspect of her vision was eluding my understanding. It was becoming agonising to be so close to her, and yet to feel that her most secret and beautiful mysteries were buried from my view.

'I believe,' Muswell once said, 'that mental isolation is the essence of weird fiction. Isolation when confronted with disease, with madness, with horror and with death. These are the reverberations of the infinity that

torments us. It is Blake who delineates these echoes of doom for us. She alone exposes our inescapable, blind stumbling towards eternal annihilation. She alone shows our souls screaming in the darkness with none to heed our cries. Ironic, isn't it, that such a beautiful young woman should possess an imagination so dark and riddled with nightmare?'

Muswell took a deep drag of his cigarette, and, in contemplating his words, seemed to gaze through everything into a limitless void.

Sometimes, when Muswell was away, I would have the collection to myself. Blake's personal letters became as sacred relics to me. Her framed photograph attained a special significance, and I was often unable to prevent myself from running my fingers around the outline of her lovely face.

One evening in February Muswell returned from one of his infrequent appointments looking particularly exhausted. I had noticed the creeping fatigue in his movements for a number of weeks. In addition to an almost constant sense of distraction he had also lost a considerable amount of weight. His subsequent confession did not, in any case, come as a shock.

'The game is up for me,' he said, 'I am wasting away. The doctor says I will not last beyond a couple of years at most. I am glad that the moment of my assignation with Blake draws near. You must ensure that I am buried with her.'

Muswell contemplated me from across the room, the light of the dim electric bulb reflected off the lenses of his spectacles, veiling the eyes behind. He continued:

'There are secrets which I have hidden from you, but I will reveal them now. I have come to learn that there are those who, though dead, lie in their coffins beyond the grip of decay. The power of eternal visions preserves them: there they lie, softly dead and dreaming. Lilith Blake is one of these and I shall be another. You will be our guardian in this world. You will ensure that our bodies are not disturbed. Once dead, we must not be awakened from the eternal dream. It is for the protection of Lilith and myself that I have allowed you to share in my thoughts and her literary legacy. Everything will make sense once you have read her final works.'

He climbed up the steepest step-ladder to the twilight of the room's ceiling and took a metal box from the top of one of the bookcases. He unlocked it and drew an old writing book bound in crumpled black leather

from within. The title page was written in Lilith Blake's distinctive longhand style. I could see that it bore the title *The White Hands and Other Tales*.

'This volume,' he said, handing it to me, 'contains the final stories. They establish the truth of all that I have told you. The book must now be published. I want to be vindicated after I die. This book will prove, in the most shocking way, the supremacy of the horror tale over all other forms of literature. As I intimated to you once before, these stories are not accounts of supernatural phenomena but supernatural phenomena in themselves.

'Understand this: Blake was dead when these stories were conceived. But she still dreams and transmitted these images from her tomb to me so that I might transcribe them for her. When you read them you will know that I am not insane. All will become clear to you. You will understand how, at the point of death, the eternal dream is begun. It allows dissolution of the body to be held at bay for as long as one continues the dreaming.'

I realised that Muswell's illness had deeply affected his mind. In order to bring him back to some awareness of reality I said:

'You say that Blake telepathically dictated the stories and you transcribed them? Then how is it that the handwriting is hers and not your own?'

Muswell smiled painfully, paused, and then, for the first and last time, took off his gloves. The hands were Lilith Blake's, the same pale, attenuated forms I recognised from her photograph.

'I asked for a sign that I was not mad,' said Muswell, 'and it was given to me.'

***

Four weeks later Muswell died.

The doctor's certificate listed the cause of death as heart failure. I had been careful, and as he was already ill, there was little reason for the authorities to suspect anything.

Thus I became Muswell's literary executor and his collection of Blakeiana was left in my sole care. I also gained possession of his rooms. Frankly, I had never countenanced the idea of fulfilling any of Muswell's requests and I arranged for his body to be cremated and his ashes scattered

at the St Marylebone Cemetery amongst the tidy ranks of graves and bleached headstones. At least I would now be in a position to peruse the remaining papers and writings without further interference. There was much to be done, so much to be deciphered, so many mysteries to unravel. If Lilith Blake was the portal to the world beyond, then I would be the one to whom its secrets would be revealed.

I managed only to read the title story of *The White Hands and Other Tales*. The book seemed too hideous for anyone but a lunatic to read in its entirety. Even the title story was more like an incantation. The further one progressed the more incomprehensible and sinister the words became. The text had sometimes been reversed and was increasingly obscene, conjuring visions of eternal desolation and an agony of depraved despair.

Through the months, through the spring, sultry summer and again into winter, each day I drew down the blinds in Muswell's room, shutting out the world. I sought to solve the riddle beyond life and death, yet something in me feared the answer. I began to feel that it lay not in Blake's seemingly endless notes and manuscripts. All seemed to point elsewhere. It was becoming clear to me that Muswell may have been close to the truth, and that the solution lay in the corpse of Lilith Blake herself. I would need to see her in the flesh.

I decided that I would arrange for the body to be exhumed and brought to me here in Muswell's—*my*— rooms. It took me weeks to make the necessary contacts and raise the money required. How difficult it can be to get something done, even something so seemingly simple! How tedious the search for the sordid haunts of the necessary types, the hints dropped in endless conversations with untrustworthy strangers in dirty public houses. How venal, how mercenary is the world at large. During the nights of sleeplessness Lilith Blake's voice would sometimes seem to call to me across the darkness. When I was able to sleep I encountered beautiful dreams, where I would be walking among pale shades in an overgrown and crumbling necropolis. The moonlight seemed abnormally bright and even filtered down to the catacombs where I would find Lilith's shrouded form.

At last terms were agreed. Two labourers were hired to undertake the job, and on the appointed night I waited in my rooms. Outside, the rain was falling heavily and in my mind's eye, as I sat anxiously in the armchair smoking cigarette after cigarette, I saw the deed done; the two simpletons,

clad in their raincoats and with crowbars and pickaxes, climbing over the high wall which ran along Swains Lane, stumbling through the storm and the overgrown grounds past stone angels and ruined monuments, down worn steps to the circular avenue, deep in the earth, but open to the mottled grey- and-black sky. Wet leaves must have choked the passageways. I could see the rain sweeping over the hillside cemetery as they levered open the door to her vault, their coats floundering in the wind. The memory of Lilith Blake's face rose before me through the hours that passed. I seemed to see it in every object that caught my gaze. I had left the blind up and watched the rain beating at the window above me, the water streaming down the small Georgian panes. I began to feel like an outcast of the universe.

As I waited, the eyes in the clock on the mantelpiece stared back at me. I thought I saw two huge and thin white spiders crawling across the books on the shelves.

At last there were three loud knocks on the door and I came to in my chair, my heart pounding in my chest. I opened the door to the still-pouring rain, and there at last, shadowy in the night, were my two grave-robbers. They were smiling unpleasantly, their hair plastered down over their worm-white faces. I pulled the wad of bank notes from my pocket and stuffed them into the nearest one's grasp.

They lugged the coffin inside and set it down in the middle of the room.

And then they left me alone with the thing. For a while, the sodden coffin dripped silently onto the rug, the dark pools forming at its foot spreading slowly outwards, sinking gradually into the worn and faded pile. Although its wooden boards were decrepit and disfigured with dank patches of greenish mould, the lid remained securely battened down by a phalanx of rusty nails. I had prepared for this moment carefully; I had all the tools I needed ready in the adjoining room, but something, a sudden sense of foreboding, made me hesitate foolishly. At last, with a massive effort of will, I fetched the claw hammer and chisel, and knelt beside the coffin. Once I had prised the lid upwards and then down again, leaving the rusted nail-tops proud, I drew them out one by one. It seemed to take forever—levering each one up and out and dropping it onto the slowly growing pile at my feet. My lips were dry and I could barely grip the tools in my slippery hands. The shadows of the rain still trickling down the window were thrown

over the room and across the coffin by the orange glow of the street lamp outside.

Very slowly, I lifted the lid.

Resting in the coffin was a figure clothed in a discoloured muslin shroud. Exquisite long hands were folded across its bosom. The head was lost in shadow, so, slowly and carefully, I lifted it up to the light. The neck was supple and still youthful, the throat pale and long. Her raven-black hair seemed to have grown longer whilst she had slept in the tomb.

Then the light touched her face. I saw that it was magnificently unchanged. It was perfection. For a hundred years she had lain undecayed in glory: her deathly beauty was overwhelming. I bent down to kiss those dark, fleshy lips. Her eyes were closed and even the lashes seemed longer, as if they too had grown: they reminded me of the limbs of a spider. As my mouth brushed hers, Lilith's eyes flickered open. For an instant she seemed bewildered, but then her porcelain face cracked into an expression of the starkest terror. It was as if I had awoken her from a deep nightmare, a dream so filled with horror that one could only emerge from it utterly insane.

Within an instant her white fingers were wrapped around my throat and squeezing hard. While I struggled in an ecstasy of terror, she laughed, hideously. But then her grip on my throat slackened and her whole body convulsed in agony. Her flesh seemed to crumble away. She shrieked at me and her words invoked a curse in the sinister language of her final stories. Specks of red foam splattered from her open mouth and her sharp little teeth gnashed in anguish.

At last, her whole body collapsed in on itself. Her skin became a darker and darker shade of grey, and the raven hair turned white. Soon, only the white shroud and a pile of black dust remained, a desiccated heap on the coffin floor.

That night, during a lull in the rain, I burned the coffin in the back yard. It was only after many days that I discovered that the marks made by her long white fingers remained permanently impressed upon my throat.

***

I travelled abroad for some months afterwards, seeking southern climes bathed in warm sunshine and blessed with short nights. But my thoughts

gradually returned to *The White Hands and Other Tales*. I wondered if it might be possible to achieve control over it, to read it in its entirety and use it to attain my goal. Finally, its lure proved decisive. I convinced myself that I had already borne the darkest horrors, that this would have proved a meet preparation for its mysteries, however obscenely they were clothed. And so, returning once more to Highgate, I began the task of transcribing and interpreting the occult language of the book, delving far into its deep mysteries. Surely I could mould the dreams to my own will and overcome the nightmare. Once achieved, I would dwell forever, in Paradise. . . .

***

Text of a letter written by John Harrington whilst under confinement in Maudsley Psychiatric Hospital:

My dearest wife Lilith,
I do not know why you have not written or come to see me.

The gentlemen looking after me here are very kind but will not allow any mirrors. I know there is something awful about my face. Everyone is scared to look at it.

They have taken your book away. They say it is gibberish. But I know all the secrets now.

Sometimes I laugh and laugh.

But I like the white hands that crawl around my bed at night like two spiders. They laugh with me.

Please write or come.

With all my heart,

John.

The Grandmaster's Final Game

The Church of St Ignatius of Loyola appeared to be empty but the Reverend Mooney, S.J., still sat waiting in the confessional, squinting at his watch in the shadows. Would anyone be attending the sacrament of penance today or could he now retire to his comfortable armchair and study some chess problems? His mind was already wandering to the chessboard and the intellectual intricacies that awaited him there.

All seemed quiet. He stretched his legs, got up and opened the box door, glanced across the nave towards the entrance and confirmed that there were no further absolutions to grant today. Watery light filtered through the stained glass windows. Outside it was a grey October morning and rain pittered upon the church roof. It appeared to be increasing in tempo and the noise began to echo around the building's interior. Father Mooney walked over to the crucifix above the altar, knelt and genuflected, and offered up a silent prayer.

Whilst still on his knees, he heard the church door opening quietly behind him, a momentary increase in the hiss of the rain, and the door closing once more. He struggled to his feet and saw a man with a hat, scarf and raincoat tottering down the aisle, making for the confessional. The priest hastily resumed his position in the box and listened to the squelching and uncertain footsteps. The man slumped into the seat beyond the thin wooden partition that separated them. Father Mooney attempted to get a look at him through the latticed window but the man's head was lowered and the brim of his hat obscured his face.

'Bless me Father, for I have sinned.'

'May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy . . .' Father Mooney responded.

'Father, this is no common confession.' The voice sounded unhealthily breathless.

'Please try to continue. Don't be afraid or ashamed. Let Christ enter your heart and be sincere in your repentance. There is nothing so terrible that it can keep out his forgiveness from those that truly seek it. When did you last go to confession?'

'I've lapsed Father. Tell me, do you believe that evil really exists?'

Father Mooney shifted uncomfortably. He leant back and thoughtfully drew his fingers across his chin. Finally he spoke:

'There are certainly wicked men in the world, but much evil can be ascribed to folly or ignorance.'

'No, Father. Not in this case. If a man comes back from the dead it means he is too wicked even for Hell to contain him. I've come to you because you are the only one that can help me.'

Well, thought Father Mooney, this is a curious case. He noticed that it felt rather cold in the box and he rubbed his hands together for warmth.

'What assistance can I offer that any other priest could not?' He said.

The man took a deep, rattling breath and said:

'I know that you were one of the finest chess players in Europe before you were called to holy orders.'

Father Mooney's brow creased.

'I am not sure that I understand,' he replied. 'You'd better explain.'

***

My name is Leonard Hughes. You may have heard of me. I caused something of a stir at the Hastings Chess Tournament a few years ago. I entered the challengers' section as an unknown and swept all opposition before me. I had beaten the British champion John Summers and the Russian grandmaster Dr Kominov before a very close defeat at the hands of the American genius Billy Burns. However, when I entered the tournament the following year I was easily beaten by all three.

My system was very simple. I have a phenomenal memory. It was possible for me to recall every single piece of data that I had seen from the age of four. My memory has brought me many benefits in life. Over a period of some years I had amassed a fortune through financial dealing, using a system involving borrowing capital and investing it, by selling on businesses that I had set up in order to acquire others in turn. I knew every detail of the contracts that I had negotiated and every fluctuation in the share prices of my portfolio. And yet once I had acquired sufficient wealth to ensure that the rest of my life would be lived in any way that I wished to live it, my interest in it deteriorated. The challenge had been met and

overcome and I realised that it was the chase, rather than the kill that had fascinated me.

My obsession with chess came about when I overheard a chance remark made by a man to his dining companion at a restaurant in Charlotte Street where I often took lunch. He said: ‘Do you know that it has been calculated that there are more possible moves in the game of chess than there are estimated to be atoms in the entire universe?’

Thereafter, I began to read deeply in the subject and to try my hand at mastering a pursuit that I knew would test my memory to its limits.

Before I played a game I would analyse every single scrap of available information about my opponent’s past tactics (in fact, memorising every recorded game they had ever played) and then use this against them. I focused on my opponent’s weaknesses, whilst I relied on my memory of the most advantageous moves from the millions of possible variations. At the first tournament I succeeded, as I have said, brilliantly. Commentators did seem to baulk at the ruthlessly mechanical nature of my strategy, the merciless grinding down of my opponent. Of course, at the following tournament, my rivals were better prepared. They had realised that I was simply repeating sequences of moves from historic games, and so all they had to do was introduce just one slightly odd or irrational move and I would be at a loss to find a precedent. It would take several moves before I could regain my confidence, by which time they had me beaten. Once my weakness was exposed I suffered defeat after defeat.

After that tournament I decided to lock myself away from the world in my mansion-house in Highgate, freeing myself from distractions until I’d studied every possible strategy of the game. I had pushed my memory to its limits. Now I needed to learn how to think originally.

It was a hard, lonely task. Every day, four hours on, one hour off, I would lean over a chessboard, moving pieces, trying endless combinations. Previously I had mentally digested every variation of the game I had been able to find in chess magazines and manuals, but now I tried to understand how winning strategies had been devised.

I saw no one. I spoke to no one. Indeed, after months of this intense monomania I feared that I was able to think only in algebraic chess notation. And yet I felt a sense of extreme exhilaration. Although I could still not play naturally or originally, I played audacious variations of my

own devising, and when they were successful I memorised these strategies down endless avenues of black and white squares, seeking to make up for my own lack of inspiration. In truly mastering chess I felt that I was undertaking a task more complex than unravelling the secrets of the universe.

Then, one morning, six months into my regime, I caught sight of a pale, gaunt face in the hall mirror while on my way out to catch a breath of fresh air. I hardly recognised it as my own. All the life seemed to have been sucked from it.

One afternoon off. One afternoon of aimless perambulation. Perhaps the distraction would do me good. But it really wasn't any good. My thoughts kept wandering back to my analyses and nothing else made any impression on me. Only when passing a second-hand bookshop did I feel a prick of interest. I entered, intent on seeking more chess books.

The shelves in the shop were very close together and I had to squeeze along the narrow aisles, avoiding boxes of books on the floor. Although the stock seemed quite general, I did actually find one or two simplistic chess primers, and I decided to ask the young assistant if she could help any further.

I went up to the desk and cleared my throat; she was engrossed in reading a tattered copy of Borges' *Labyrinths*, the Penguin edition, open at page ninety-four. She put down the paperback, marking the page by folding its corner, and peered at me over steel spectacles.

'No,' she said in answer to my query, 'all of the stock is on the shelves. Oh, we did find a funny-looking chess set in amongst a carton of books the other day. Do you want to look at it?'

I nodded unenthusiastically. She stood up, went into a little back room and returned carrying a wooden box under her arm. She cleared a space among the piles of dusty volumes and laid the box on the desk in front of me.

It contained a rather gaudy chessboard of gold and purple. More remarkable, though, was the bizarre collection of black chess pieces that went with it. I picked up one that might be a queen and examined it closely. There was something horrible about its misshapen appearance; it gave the impression that it had been crudely carved from a peculiar piece of bone.

Inside the box were fashioned recesses in which the black pieces rested. But I could find no white pieces, and no recesses in the box for them. I looked up at the assistant, who was eyeing me with barely concealed boredom.

'How much?' I asked, wondering why I was bothering with the thing at all.

'As it's only half-complete, say £10.'

I nodded my assent, put the black queen into my pocket and wrote out a cheque. When she took it from me her expression was distasteful, perhaps as a consequence of my banking at Coutts in the Strand. I suspect that she regretted not having asked for more.

When I left the shop it was raining outside and I hastily buttoned up my mackintosh. The edge of the chess box dug uncomfortably into my ribs as I walked along the deserted, rain-sodden streets. I put my free hand into my pocket and found the queen that I had slipped in there.

As I drew it out I dropped the thing on the pavement. It lay in a puddle, and I hesitated before retrieving it. I was sure that the piece had wriggled sharply in my hand like a worm. . . .

By the time I got back to my house I'd managed to convince myself that the writhing chess piece had been an hallucination brought on by mental strain. I slumped down in a chair and took the chess set from the plastic bag provided by the assistant, opened the box and let the contents spill onto my desk. It occurred to me that in order to test my mental sharpness, it might be a good exercise to play a game against myself.

I gathered the scattered black pieces and put them in place on the board opposite some ordinary white pieces from another set. The black ones looked like a regiment of misshapen demons. At that moment it did not seem quite so ridiculous to believe that the queen had actually squirmed in my fist. I began with white, moving a pawn to e4. But before my fingers reached the black pawn it moved of its own accord to c6. The movement was swift and I heard a little thump as the piece settled forcefully on the square. I stared in disbelief.

After some hesitation, I stretched out a trembling hand and played d4. My eyes focused and unfocused as I awaited a reply. Another black pawn thumped down aggressively on d5. I bit my fist and drew blood. My brain was swimming. The room seemed to be closing in around me, the shadows

lengthening. I reached over to my cigarettes and stuck one in my mouth, lit it, and sucked the smoke greedily into my lungs, rapidly inhaling and exhaling as I struggled to get a grip on my sanity.

Black was playing an outrageous variation on the Caro-Kann. I spotted its significance after two more of my own moves. It was a strategy of titanic deviousness. Unless I could recover I was bound to lose a knight. Suddenly I knew that I must not lose this game. I did not know what losing would mean, but the mere thought of it filled me with unfathomable dread.

The cigarette I held had burnt down to a drooping finger of ash. The debris detached itself and fell onto the board.

Something blew it away. I heard a rasping, hollow wheeze, an asthmatic exhalation fading gradually to silence.

I played on, moving the pieces with slippery fingers from which I was periodically forced to wipe the sweat with a handkerchief. Five moves later black broke through and his misshapen pieces gradually scrabbled towards my surrounded king. And finally, when black delivered checkmate, I felt a searing, intolerable pain shooting into my face and left hand. The pain was so great that I toppled sideways and writhed on the floor in agony. Half an hour later, though it seemed like an eternity, the sensation ebbed away and I got to my feet.

I was changed.

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Father Mooney sat patiently during the hiatus that followed. Leonard Hughes seemed to be fighting for breath and his heavy gasps fell and rose disturbingly.

‘Can you continue?’ The priest said.

‘I think . . . it’s best . . . if I show . . . you, Father.’ Hughes said between breaths.

The effort involved in recounting the tale seemed to have exhausted him. Father Mooney heard the door of the confessional being opened. Hughes staggered out, and Father Mooney followed. He stood there in the church, facing the stranger, still unable to make out his features clearly due to the scarf wrapped high around the chin, and the turned-down hat. Father Mooney had experienced nothing like this before. It was an encounter with

the sort of problem that had previously seemed safely confined solely to medieval theology. Could something beyond God's mercy have really entered the portals of his church?

Slowly, reluctantly, Hughes removed his hat and scarf. He was still fighting for breath, but seemed to have gained at least a modicum of control over his lungs.

The man was obviously still in agony for his face was constantly contorting from grimace to scowl. As his expressions changed it was as though his features altered, and although it unsettled Father Mooney, it also intrigued him that at times the stranger's visage appeared familiar.

'You recognise the face? I can see it in your eyes, Father.' Hughes said.

Now that his memory had been jogged Father Mooney also began to feel that the wheezing breath was familiar to him.

It all came back.

Father Mooney remembered Boris Petrovski. He remembered the chess player's devilish face across the board during the 1964 Masters' Tournament in Kiev: the tortured brow, the ferocious eyes glaring beneath shaggy eyebrows, the sardonically curling lip, the way he ran his tongue across his long teeth in a feral manner and, above all, the heaving of his weak lungs, deafeningly asthmatic, during play. He had been a player of immense deviousness. Mooney had taken only a single game from him, but this, coupled with a series of three draws, was ranked as brilliance against a player then considered to be one of the greatest ever to have graced the world of chess. There was absolutely no doubt that Petrovski possessed a genius of the first order but there was also something very disturbing about him. He had an uncanny skill, virtually telepathic, of unsettling his opponent and ruining their concentration. It was as if one were being contaminated by malevolence.

Petrovski socialised with no one. At tournaments he was avoided and detested. For this reason he did not achieve the recognition that he felt was due from his peers and from commentators on the game. His ability to alienate even admirers of his play was remarkable. Such was the animosity he aroused that records of his matches were extremely sketchy. Petrovski's own notes were never published and he made sure that they were destroyed shortly before his death. He hated the thought of anyone else benefiting from his genius. It was even said by his detractors that Petrovski dabbled in

dubious occult practices, and that this was responsible for his serpentine deviousness and his frighteningly accurate power of anticipation.

When Mooney had defeated him that one time it had been due to a continuous shifting of his strategy requiring almost intolerable mental gymnastics. He had proved that it was possible to counter Petrovski, but one risked forfeiting the game by exceeding the time limit. Relying on this utterly draining method of play was thus hazardous, but no other tactic had ever succeeded.

Some said that it was the mental strain of playing Petrovski that had caused Mooney to abandon his career as a professional chess player. It was after this that he had pursued the private study of theology that eventually culminated in his reception into the priesthood some years later.

'Will you come with me Father?' Hughes said.

'I know what I have to do.' The priest replied. He turned to the altar, genuflected, and went to fetch his hat and coat.

***

Hughes' house in Highgate was littered with newspaper clippings of chess columns, scribbled chess notation and pages torn from chess manuals. There were piles of chess books jammed into corners. The place reeked of stale cigarette smoke. In the centre of his study stood a large table topped with a chessboard: with a start Father Mooney recognised it as Petrovski's purple and gold board. The room was lit by a profusion of candles that, in the gathering twilight, cast flickering shadows on the walls.

Father Mooney crossed the study and looked down at the misshapen chess pieces. They were even more horrible than the mental images Hughes' narrative had formed in his imagination. The white pieces were from an ordinary modern set. Father Mooney ran his fingers over the chess clock.

'Sit down and play Father.' Hughes gasped, his words breaking the train of Father Mooney's thoughts. Could it really be Petrovski who addressed Father Mooney now? The priest noted that Petrovski's accent had shifted to thick, guttural Russian. It seemed that all this was leading up inexorably to a rematch between himself and the Russian. But why?

The most likely explanation was also the most outrageous. There had been those rumours about Petrovski's interest in the occult. There were some who had believed that Petrovski had found a way of employing the forces of the Qlippoth, the reverse structure of the universe in Kabbalistic magic. It supposedly gave black an almost irresistible advantage in play over the board. The rumours had been that Petrovski had gone so far as to create his own chess set based on this arcanum. But the Russian was dead, wasn't he?

'Play.' The voice said.

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Father Mooney leaned over the board, looked at it for the fifth time and then glanced at his clock. If he continued playing at such a slow rate he would forfeit the game. His mouth was painfully dry and he longed for a glass of cool water. He didn't dare look at his opponent's face again. He'd made that mistake once before. He thanked God that candles rather than electricity lighted the room and that the shadowy horror across the board was only partially visible. There was a wolfish gleam in Petrovski's eyes as he played and a mocking sneer on his lips despite the continuous, painful wheezing of his lungs.

The game was going very badly for the priest. And yet he was undoubtedly playing the best chess of his life. His multifaceted strategy was even more brilliant than the one he'd used when he defeated Petrovski all those years ago. But his opponent was playing with contemptuous speed and power. He made Father Mooney's moves seem like the fumblings of a beginner.

Father Mooney checked to see how many minutes had passed and pushed his queen forward. He stopped the clock on his side.

Petrovski replied instantly and, to the priest's horror, he realised he must lose the piece.

Father Mooney countered, only staving off absolute disaster by forfeiting one of his bishops in addition to the queen. Of course he could not resign. But now he teetered on the brink of the pit. He found his concentration failing. The wheezing of Petrovski's lungs was becoming louder.

Nothing came to Father Mooney. He sat staring at the board. The clock was ticking away. His time was virtually up. Every possible counter-move seemed to lead inevitably to black's victory. It seemed utterly hopeless.

In his despair, the priest felt his faith falling away. He was coming to believe that his vocation to the priesthood was a sham. It seemed but a feeble self-justification of his inability to form a meaningful relationship with a woman. He was an impotent, terrified old hypocrite. Hollow and afraid. Suddenly he thought of the people that were being snuffed out like candle flames all across the world at that very moment. Those dying alone in hospital beds, bundled up beside dirty syringes, on roads smeared with their own blood and guts, or in brilliant sunshine with empty bellies, in the oceans with lungs filled by sea water, or in stinking alleyways with knife wounds; and all those who simply waste away, day by day, bit by bit, in the clutches of an intolerable sense of loneliness, unshriven and cursing the God in whom they did not believe, who could not deliver them from their pain.

But then, in a flash, Father Mooney moved his remaining bishop, flinging it triumphantly across the board in a huge diagonal sweep.

'Mate in three!' He cried.

His opponent howled, glanced at the board, and scattered all the pieces across it. A transformation took place in the flickering shadows. The figure opposite arched its back and stretched itself in the way that a huge cat would after awakening from a deep sleep. But the stretching went on and on until the body elongated and twisted beyond its limits. Its asthmatic breathing was as loud as waves crashing against rocks and it stretched out clawed hands towards Father Mooney.

The candles flickered uncertainly. Finally they blew out and the howling form leapt at him in the darkness.

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Leonard Hughes awoke feeling a sense of blissful release. It was as if he had suddenly recovered from an agonising sickness. He knew at once that, whatever the thing was that had taken him over, it was gone; he was himself again. Yet still some lingering trace of the thing's memory remained in his

brain, a stench of brimstone trailing in its wake. He got up and fumbled towards the nearest of the candles, lit it and peered around the room.

The chess set was a blackened, burnt mass. And on the floor, in a crumpled heap with his head twisted backward at a hideous angle, lay the corpse of Father Mooney. His body appeared to have been flung back and forth across the room like a rag-doll at the mercy of an enraged child. Hughes bent over and examined its features. There was no sign of any intrusion upon them.

Then, just before the very last of the beast's memories had finally dissipated, he remembered its awful rage at having lost the game.

It had realised, too late, that Father Mooney had placed his bishop on a square that could only be reached by cheating.

Mannequins in Aspects of Terror

Your eyes did see my unformed substance
Psalm 139

The office tower had long fascinated me.

I would gaze at it from the windows of Barlow and Barlow Associates, the architectural firm that employed me. Over the course of the last four years I had watched the tower becoming gradually deserted. One company after another had left the premises and, once darkness fell, the number of windows that were lit up became gradually less. Businesses whose offices were located there seemed unable to achieve commercial success. From what I could gather, those working within its confines complained of a general malaise and a progressive worsening of staff morale over time. There were rumours about the air-conditioning system carrying some form of Legionnaires' disease, but extensive tests showed no trace of its presence. In the end the inconclusive reason given was that those working there were subject to 'sick building syndrome.'

The tower consisted of twenty-seven floors with an exterior of dark green glass. Its appearance had worsened as the years passed and it stood as an obvious indictment of 1960s architecture: a decaying monument to inhuman design that dominated the skyline for miles around.

And then one night I realised that the last of the businesses in the building must have relocated. The single floor that had been lit during the hours of darkness now had windows as black as the rest. The building was untenanted and desolate. Nothing moved within its confines and I imagined in my mind's eye the abandoned and silent spaces, the empty rooms, and the labyrinth of dusty corridors. In the teeming metropolis, whose streets and buildings were crawling with people, like insects in a hive, this tower was vacant: a void.

The building had a profound effect upon my own work. The architectural designs upon which I was working for my firm gave me little satisfaction. My realised projects had consisted only of nondescript houses, public utilities and the updating of an unremarkable bus depot in the north of the country. I longed for the opportunity to work on a larger, grander

scale, on some construction that would be appreciated, that would be seen from far away, my own pinnacle amongst the office towers scattered across the city. In idle moments I would sketch designs for the tower that I would build and invariably its lines echoed the empty building that dominated the view from my drawing board.

I wanted so badly to wander around inside the building and I told myself that it was for the purposes of my pet architectural project. Yet perhaps it was really a fascination for solitude that drew me to it. Certainly I had been conscious of its appeal becoming stronger as fewer and fewer windows had been left lit in the evenings. So completely abandoned, it seemed to me a consummation of a terrible beauty. For what was it now but a vacuum, an oasis of nothing, where all else around it was but the maddening whirl of asinine human activity? I viewed it as a vertical desert, closed off from the outside, a region without the distractions of the commonplace. I did wonder for a while whether it would be feasible to employ the designs for my own tower in a radical refurbishment of the existing building, but in the end I resisted this idea. It was not just that my ego preferred the potential of an entirely new project; I also did not want to see the building changed. I was fascinated by the tower because of its very abandonment.

Yet if it was my ambition to be the designer of a similar tower with the same starkness of design, a construction looming high above the teeming streets and framed by the sky, one whose very presence caused men's views to be drawn upwards by its smooth lines and uncluttered simplicity, then it would make sense for me to see the original from the inside, to study it fully.

A few days after the lights on that last occupied floor were extinguished, I attempted to gain entry. I finished at work and walked through the few streets that lay between my place of employment and the tower. It was a dark winter's afternoon, even though it wasn't late, and although I knew that my expedition was likely to end in failure, I needed to at least try to get into the building, if only for my own peace of mind.

I finally stood at its base. The gigantic monolith seemed almost to blot out the sky. It was immediately obvious that I was not going to be able to get inside. The foyer had been boarded up and padlocked and the first two floors were protected by corrugated iron sheets. Higher up, the windows

were completely dark. For a brief moment I fancied that I saw a pale, white face at one of them, but quickly realised that it must have been a trick of the early evening light. The whole building was obviously deserted.

For a time I wandered aimlessly around its circumference and across the abandoned square in which it stood, with its concrete loggias and unused car park. In the end I gave up and made my way home to my apartment on the other side of the city.

Almost every night for weeks afterwards I would dream of treading the lost corridors and empty offices of the tower, the canteens, stairways, storage rooms and lavatories. During my lunch hours at work I would make sketches of the tower, drawing its planes and angles and noting its few stark details. My interest in it was the cause of some curiosity in my work colleagues and several of them even asked to view the structure through the field glasses that I had bought in order to examine the building more closely. I felt some resentment at their interest: I had begun to regard the tower as my sole preserve. I alone could appreciate the splendid starkness of its design and the desolation that it contained.

I had always been an outsider in the profession. I worked alongside qualified architects who were university trained, but I was a mere technician. The fact that I did a comparable job meant nothing in terms of status or pay. Nevertheless, I had risen through the firm's ranks and was now entrusted with overall control of some projects, although I was never given anything with any real scope for design. The moment I realised that the tower had become finally empty I began to neglect my proper work. But because I was considered such a useful employee it took quite some time before it was noticed that I was behind schedule and questions were asked.

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One afternoon a colleague who knew of my interest in the tower passed me a newspaper containing an advertisement for an art installation. I did not see the significance at first, but he pointed out that it was housed on the uppermost floors of my tower. The installation was temporarily closed but apparently due to reopen on the Friday of the following week. I had not been aware of its existence, although the installation, by the artist Eleazer Golmi, appeared to have been exhibited there for some undefined period. I

recognised the name of the artist, of course, for he had also been the architect of the building that housed his installation.

On several occasions I had attempted to track the man down in order to express my interest in his designs, but he seemed no longer to work in the profession and had, effectively, ‘gone underground’ after some unspecified crisis many years ago. The few that knew of him had told me that he had been disillusioned by attacks on his work from both inside and outside the profession. Other architects of the 1960s had been thick-skinned enough to ignore criticism, but not Golmi.

The advertised details of the installation left me with mixed feelings. The show was entitled ‘Mannequins in Aspects of Terror’ and promised, it was claimed, an audio-visual experience of an unsettling nature in which one would encounter ‘a universe of fear’. This didn’t sound like the Golmi that I had imagined. Some saw horror, it was true, in what his buildings had been allowed to become: grimy, decaying concrete hulks. But I saw them as they were first built: tall, proud visions of a noble future, reaching up to the heavens with pure, dynamic lines. Golmi was not to blame if the owners of his buildings had refused to maintain them and let them crumble.

But why was he interested in terror, and unsettling people, and exploring fear? I came up with many theories in the long days before I was able to see the installation for myself. It seemed probable that Golmi would be exploring the horror of what other people had done to his glorious work.

I kept a close eye on the top floor of the building, and hung around the padlocked doors for many hours in the hope of detecting the work that would, no doubt, be required for the reopening. But I saw nothing.

At last the designated night came and I found that the tower’s foyer had indeed been reopened. The padlocks and the boards were gone, exposing the dark green windows on the ground floor. A single poster advertised the installation: it was rather gaudy, with a purple gothic script on a yellow background. At its centre was a grainy photograph of the architect and artist.

At the time the photograph was taken Golmi must have been in his fifties. He had brylcreemed grey hair, a high forehead and dark eyes, one of which, the right, was considerably larger than the other. It gave the face an unfortunate, lop-sided appearance. His expression reminded me of the

rigidity common to those early photographs where the subject had to sit perfectly still for several minutes while the camera shutter was left open.

I stood back and once again gazed up at Golmi's monolith. Was it possible to reconcile the utopian vision of his design, with its sharp lines soaring ever upwards, with the crumbling pile of dark, stained concrete and glass it had become? Both fascinated me. Perhaps the fact that Golmi had placed his art installation in one of his own buildings meant that he, too, had realised the spectral potential of the tower. Had he also come to relish this desolate space in the teeming metropolis?

I entered the foyer and made my way to a single desk situated in the very centre of the otherwise empty space. There was a simple sign declaring that the installation began on floor twenty-six and that payment was to be made at the end of the show. There was no attendant to direct the visitors, but next to the sign was a schedule of entry times. My watch told me that the next available slot began in five minutes. The last visitor had signed the register five minutes previously and marked the time clearly, as required in the box provided. A handwritten note at the top of the page stated that admittance was staggered to ensure the isolation necessary for each visitor.

I faithfully signed the register and when my time came I made my way over to one of several lifts and pressed the button. A small sign informed me that this was the one to be used in order to visit the installation. I watched the numbers on the indicator above the single door flash from twenty-six downwards. While I waited I looked at the remnants of company names printed on a wooden board. They must have been defaced by disgruntled employees as their companies gave up and vacated the building.

When the lift arrived I opened the outer door and then pulled across the trellis gate that separated me from the panelled wooden cage within. The interior was not large, having a capacity for a maximum of four people. At first I simply thought it small for a building with such a potentially huge occupancy. It had obviously seen much use. I thought from its design that the lift must date to the 1950s. So perhaps the building was older than I'd thought? I was feeling a certain amount of confusion, perhaps due to my excitement at the prospect of the installation, but also because of the claustrophobia caused by being in such a small space and the reflection of myself in the full-length mirror on the back wall of the lift. Gazing into it I was somewhat startled by my anxious-looking appearance. My eyes seemed

to stare wildly from behind my glasses and my cheeks were flushed. The business suit that I was obliged to wear to work seemed comically apt, as did the briefcase I carried. Since I had come directly from my office I had not had the opportunity to change my clothes.

The lift rumbled upwards through the shaft, and floor after floor flashed by before it reached the twenty-sixth. The cage jolted to a halt and I pulled back the trellis door, opened the outer one and entered a long, deserted corridor, dimly lit and utterly silent. The floor was covered in tiled linoleum, but it was well worn and curled upwards at the edges. In patches it had come away altogether, revealing stained concrete beneath. As I proceeded uncertainly I could see holes in the false ceiling, where the covering polystyrene tiles had fallen down. Out of these holes trailed cables and wires.

It was not obvious where I should be going, so I looked in through a half-opened door to my left. It was an abandoned gents toilet, thick with dirt. The cubicle doors hung ajar and the toilet bowls and urinals were broken, with fragments of porcelain scattered on the floor. I returned to the corridor and after a few more paces finally noticed a sign with an arrow, indicating the direction I was to follow.

I turned right. This corridor seemed to be exactly the same as the first. I was beginning to feel a sense of emptiness creep over me, deadening my spirits, replacing the tension I'd previously felt. And then I realised what should have been obvious: this was the installation! The sense of isolation and dislocation was complete.

I felt utterly alone as I walked through the confines of the artificial void. The atmosphere of neglect and decay grew steadily and I congratulated Golmi on his achievement.

I wondered just when the idea for the installation had come to him? Perhaps he had received some dim intimation of the final destiny of his building when he was still a successful architect. It was a bold conceit to think of placing his personal nightmare in his own building as it had decayed and become uninhabitable.

I even suspected him of vandalising his own building as a means of amplifying the decay. And what might he be saying about architecture in general, or modern life, or the human condition?

Again I thought about the word on the advertisement, ‘re-opening.’ If the installation had been first opened while there were still occupants, then what had they thought of it? Did Golmi set up the installation when he knew that the last companies were moving out? Or had it hastened their exit? How far back had he considered this project?

I thought of making my way out, but then remembered the title of the piece and guessed that I might not have seen it all. I had become aware of a sound, coming as if from a great distance. It was like the white noise found on frequencies between television stations. I had read that this was the sound of the background radiation generated when the universe came into existence billions of years ago. The sound remained at the same level as I proceeded and I could not detect its source, though I suspected that it must have been piped through concealed speakers. Looking through the windows to my left I saw the vast panorama of the city below, its glittering sodium-orange lights so very far removed from this study of desolation. Within was eternal twilight, greyness and shadow, an effect achieved by low-wattage strip lighting.

There was a large office to my right. Inside, all of the furniture had been removed and there were marks on the thin carpet where the desks, chairs and filing cabinets must once have stood.

The continuous hiss of background static was beginning to annoy me; its familiarity had failed to make it subliminal. If I listened with enough concentration it sounded almost like whispering and although it was almost inaudible I was becoming sure that it was charged with some hidden significance. In the next corridor was a sign, a ragged thing of cardboard, with letters scrawled as if in a child’s handwriting. It read ‘Mannequins in Aspects of Terror’. So perhaps the real installation was about to begin!

Almost at once I came across the first of the mannequins. In the twilight of the corridor, and from a distance, I initially thought that it must be a custodian, there to oversee the exhibition and guide the visitors. This would certainly have been useful, for the arrows were few and far between.

As I drew closer to the mannequin I noticed that the background hiss had acquired a new element. There were definite words amongst the static, though broken and garbled, like speech distorted by poor radio reception. I could not make out the words, but the voice seemed to speak as if in pain: almost as if it were incoherent with that pain. I thought that one of the

words might be ‘alive!’ croaked out over and over again, but could not be sure.

And then suddenly I was close enough to see the face of the mannequin. It had been made insidiously disturbing. It was rigid and frozen in stark panic, as if it were looking at some particularly horrific sight, and its arms were raised as if to ward off some approaching menace. As I stared at the thing, I felt contaminated by it, fearing that my own features were beginning to assume the dummy’s own and that my mind might give way to the fear that had frozen it. When I thought of that lifeless mouth actually forming the broken words that still mingled with the low, background noise of static I had to acknowledge that the artist had indeed managed to create the terror claimed by the advertisement.

The noise began to fade as I walked nervously on down the dusty corridor. It was gradually replaced by another sound, like that of people muttering quietly to each other in some other part of the building. The mutterings were clearly audible and I could not shake off the feeling that they were aware of my presence, even though the idea was absurd. I kept glancing behind me as I progressed, and found that I was almost creeping along, anticipating dangers that might lurk around the next corner.

In my anxiety I began to mumble to myself and the sound of my own voice offered some meagre comfort.

The next port of call was an office that appeared, at first glance, to be still in use. I paused for a moment, taken in by the illusion, until I perceived that the figures therein were absolutely motionless. I could not find the courage to enter the room and was gripped by the unsettling notion that they had stopped their activities at the very moment that I had first caught sight of them. The sounds of activity that I had heard with increasingly clarity had also seemed to cease at that exact moment. A hidden motion sensor must have detected me and would have been programmed to turn off the tape recording of the voices.

Four mannequins occupied this office, three of which were hunched in front of blank computer screens. Their hands were at the keyboards, as if they had been interrupted in the act of inputting data. The dummies were dressed in business suits that showed signs of old age and wear. The elbows and cuffs were frayed and there were patches of ugly discoloration across the pinstriped fabric. These mannequins seemed to be smiling, but as I

reluctantly entered the room for a closer look at them, I saw that they were not pleasant smiles, they had been crafted so as to resemble the rictus grin of the human skull.

The sole standing mannequin had been given a similar expression, but its staring eyes seemed less glassy than the others. I thought they had moved.

I left the room and walked, more swiftly now, along the corridor. The sounds of activity resumed behind me, furtively at first, but with increasing boldness as I moved further away. I could not help looking back, for I had developed a dread that the standing mannequin would start into spasmodic life and come after me.

I had by this time reached a stairwell and a painted arrow indicated that I was to ascend to the floor above. The walls were in a shocking state, being cracked and crumbling under the flaking brown paint. A draught of air coming from below bore with it the unmistakable odour of mould. Here on the stairs a sound of movement came from above and I could hardly bring myself to make the climb.

The echoes filtered through a door directly at the head of the stairs and now that the sound was clearer I detected what I thought were more voices. These were not like the low mutterings that I had heard previously. They were much clearer and made no attempt at concealment. They possessed a breathless and hollow quality as if the unintelligible words they uttered were formed by some imperfect replica of the human model, speaking in accents that betrayed their attempt at imitation. I thought of lips not designed for speech, croaking out anguished words, trying vainly to communicate.

I stood there in the stairwell for what seemed like minutes. Whether it was the awful atmosphere that worked on my brain or whether the sound was real I couldn’t tell, but when I did hear footsteps climbing up from below they sounded too awkward to be the next, timed visitor to the installation. Someone seemed to be staggering, almost dragging his limbs along, and as I looked down a shadow moved across the wall at a turn in the stairs. It may have been the dim light, but the figure appeared twisted over to one side. I panicked. I raced up towards the door ahead, bolting through it, with no other thought than to get away. I could not stop myself from

thinking about the standing mannequin I had seen in the office of the mad grins, of that unliving face imbued with an insane animation.

Now that I was through the door and it closed behind me the sound of the broken voices ceased. I stood shaking and listening for movement but there was none.

Although all was now quiet, the smell of the mould was overpowering. Mould grew everywhere in this corridor. There were great patches on bare walls and even underfoot on the rotten, threadbare carpet.

An arrow scrawled in chalk told me to bear left and I found myself in another abandoned office. On a desk there were several duplicated sheets of paper, filled with handwritten words. The strip lighting here was as poor as elsewhere in the building and this, coupled with the awkward script, made the words difficult to decipher. Slowly I worked my way through it. The manuscript seemed to be some sort of manifesto, a statement of intent written by Golmi:

Mannequins in Aspects of Terror:
An Art Installation
by Eleazer Golmi

Many have ruminated on the attraction of horror in art and in literature, but all have drawn erroneous conclusions. The art of false horror seeks not to engender actual fear, but to distance those experiencing it and allow them a pleasurable frisson, the sense that one might approach without arrival.

But this installation is a full immersion into terror. It is designed to generate a situation where the individual is subject to that terror and participates directly in it. In this installation one does not play a character, as does an actor in a play; one is that character. Nor must the artist be exempt from this immersion. In order for the work of art to be authentic the artist himself must also become a component of it. He must feel the terror that he creates.

Remember that there is always an end to suffering in life: pain, disease and madness lead either to recovery or to extinction, but such is not necessarily the case in art. In art a moment may be fixed for all eternity.

Imagine, if you will, a simulacrum whose existence is such a state. This is the purpose of my installation. The desolate spaces are my own little universe of terror. And the mannequins are my pretty creations, playing in the wilderness of torment, in the misery of one moment of supreme terror. And I, too, play with them, having deciphered the alphabet of the 221 gates.

The greatest fear of which I can conceive is not that of murder or torture, or any of the so-called horrors that man inflicts upon his fellow man. The greatest fear is the prolongation of life indefinitely, where all thoughts are endlessly revisited, where every memory loses its meaning by repetition, where all thoughts finally blend into one: consciousness doomed to immortality—a mind filled with the nightmare of its own being, a mind that is dying in perpetuity without final release.

Our flesh and blood dies and with it, so too dies the mind. But imagine a mind in a body that cannot die: A body of plastic and paint, carefully crafted in an aspect of pain, terror, disease, madness and decay. And then imagine what it might be like to be a mind imprisoned forever within that artificial body. What distinction is there between mind and matter? Imprisoned within a mannequin in an aspect of terror, the two become one.

The mind, now riddled with the continuous agony of its new body, built expressly for suffering, believes it to be the only existence it has ever known. Plastic and paint seem more real than flesh and blood. Who then is to say which of them is artificial? And should these new bodies start into motion, should those glass eyes turn in their sockets, whom then would deny their occupants the right to welcome visitors to this little universe of terror I have wrought? To welcome them in the only way they know how, so that the same visitors might also participate in their haunted cavalcade throughout all eternity?

Let me conclude by thanking you for choosing to experience my installation, for choosing to contribute to my pretty little vision, where henceforth you will see only through my eyes.

YHVH Elohim Met.

As I finished reading I began to feel that I was becoming enmeshed in another man's nightmare. Did I possess an independent existence, or like the mannequins I had encountered was I a construction of Eleazer Golmi?

The idea was ridiculous of course. I had not been dreamed into existence. It was just that in this ‘little universe of terror’, as he termed it, my life outside the building seemed far away and unreal.

I left the room and made my way once more along the mouldy corridor. The doors that I passed seemed to be locked, but through their glass panels I could see the silhouettes of more mannequins. Some appeared to have their faces turned to the walls and were set in crouching positions, whilst others were curled up in a ball on the concrete floors, surrounded by debris. There was one mannequin, however, who had been positioned in front of one of the glass panels. It was more horrifying than any I had seen thus far.

It was clad in the same shoddy suit as the others, but its expression was very different. The thing’s eyes bulged and its mouth opened in a grimace of agony that reached across the whole width of its plastic face. Its body was twisted over to one side in a contortion of agony. Awareness, frozen in time, that it had been shaped to suffer . . . and mingled with that awareness was an abyss of agony. This one could not look at me for it had its eyes rolled up in their sockets, its head thrown back as far as it could go.

I turned away in disgust. Another chalked arrow lead me into a further corridor, this one, to my great relief, had a sign marked ‘Exit’.

I would have run towards the set of double, rusted doors at the end of the corridor if I hadn’t felt a sudden stiffness in my limbs. It resembled the onset of cramp and my movements were becoming awkward. I felt like a puppet on strings.

By the time I reached the end of the corridor the pain in my limbs was becoming unbearable. I pushed open the double-doors. Beyond was a large room that must once have served as a canteen. The dining tables and chairs remained, although some were broken and others tipped over. Piles of rubbish, mostly paper and empty cartons, were strewn all around and the tiled walls were smeared with grease. Scattered among the debris were dozens and dozens of mannequins.

These dummies were not just tatty, but broken, with smashed limbs and fractured faces. But the agony of my own limbs was so fierce that I could hardly register the scene before me.

Through my pain, it seemed that the mannequin closest to me looked like a road accident victim, with broken arms and legs at odd angles and the top of its head smashed-in. Only the eyes were whole, the glass eyes, and

peering into them I gained the impression that there was a mind imprisoned in this damaged form. It was experiencing an agony that no living thing could bear, that flesh and blood could not possibly tolerate. I could not begin to describe their state: to die and decay and yet not to be released—to be suspended in such a condition for ever. . . .

I moved on, screaming soundlessly in my mind, as my stiff limbs were willed into motion. All around me were dummies in their corpse-shells.

In the far corner of the canteen was a large mannequin, set apart from the rest. As I drew closer, its features, though as distorted as the others, became recognisable to me. It was a man with a heavy face and one of his eyes seemed larger than the other, giving him a lop-sided appearance. The mouth began to move, emitting a low, grinding noise.

As I stood before him, my living flesh and blood became decayed paint and plastic. I waited for him to explain what was happening, but he did not move or speak.

Apartment 205

Pieter Slokker awoke from a dream in which he was trapped in a dark, windowless room. It was three o'clock in the morning, and it sounded as if someone was hammering at the door of his flat.

Slokker had not lived long in Paris. He had moved from Bruges to this cramped apartment close to the Gare du Nord Station only a few months before, in order to finish his studies in medicine. He knew no one in the mouldering old building save the garrulous concierge, and had seldom even passed a fellow tenant as he made his way up and down the torturous spiral staircase which led to his rooms on the fourth floor.

As he became more fully awake, Pieter felt a mounting sense of apprehension. The blows continued to strike the door; he had no idea who it could be, but ignoring the summons was no longer possible. Slokker got out of bed, threw on a dressing gown and made his way to the hall. Peering through the spy-hole he could at first see only the dim outline of a man.

As his eyes grew more accustomed to the dark Slokker was able to make out more of the man's features. Such was the person's appearance that he hesitated before unlocking the door. Pieter had encountered a few patients badly disfigured by their illnesses during the course of his medical training, but his insistent visitor looked worse than most. He was cadaverously thin, with an angular white face and a shaved head. But it was the man's sunken, black-rimmed eyes and hollowed cheeks that chiefly disturbed Slokker. He was reminded of the time when he had been on a tour of the Hospital morgue with his fellow students. A pathologist had shown them the corpse of a man who had starved to death after being locked in a lightless cellar by his mad wife. The memory of this man's appearance had long haunted Slokker's dreams, and so similar was this night-visitor that he could almost believe that the self-same corpse stood outside. Was it possible, he wondered, that he was still dreaming?

Slokker's state of full consciousness was, however, soon confirmed by another volley of blows against the wood, so loud this time that echoes pulsed back and forth along the empty corridor. Slokker began to draw back the bolts, though he was awake enough to remember to keep the chain on, allowing just enough space to speak to the caller. Thinking more clearly

now he had begun to formulate a diagnosis. Surely this man was a drug addict and had found out that a medical student lived in the building? Perhaps he had come in search of supplies?

Although the door was open only a fraction, the outsider thrust his emaciated face into the aperture. His wild eyes searched frantically for the occupant and in a desperate voice he cried out:

'Please! You must assist me, Monsieur. I cannot bear to be alone any longer! If you have any human feeling at all you will open the door!'

Slokker took a step back; the sight of that awful face close up, and the pathetic urgency of the request had unnerved him. He reminded himself that as a medical student it was his duty to offer any help he could. After all, the man seemed coherent enough, if rather disturbed. Drawing his dressing gown closer around himself, Slokker took the chain off the door and gestured at the man to enter.

The visitor staggered across the room without a word and slumped into a chair. Perhaps he was trying to compose himself, but his eyes darted restlessly towards the shadows. He appeared to be averting his gaze from the windows; whenever he turned inadvertently in their direction, he would put his head in his hands. After observing the man in silence for a few minutes, Slokker reappraised his initial diagnosis; he was beginning to suspect that drugs were probably not the cause of his visitor's obviously dire condition. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbow and the deathly white skin betrayed no telltale track-marks. Perhaps, then, the man was simply unhinged and wasting away through self-neglect.

'Please, it's late. Tell me how I may be of assistance. Perhaps some brandy might calm you?' Slokker used his most soothing bedside manner.

The man turned his gaze towards Pieter and tried very hard to keep it level. Then he laughed, a mocking chuckle, as if enjoying a private joke.

'You are kind, yes. I will drink with you.'

He swallowed the brandy as if suffering from a terrible thirst, but the alcohol had little visible effect on him. Despite Slokker's questions, the man seemed disinclined to speak. The medical student could do little but sit and watch his silent guest, though he was filled with unease at his presence. There was something truly unearthly about the man.

Occasionally, as the night wore on, he seemed on the verge of revealing something about himself, but would then lapse back into staring into space,

occasionally laughing as if at the same sick joke. Any suggestion Slokker made to the effect that the visitor should leave was accompanied by renewed pleas of a piteous nature and he was forced to resign himself to the strange companionship.

Finally, just as dawn was breaking, the visitor made to depart and Slokker watched him as he staggered back along the corridor. To his surprise and interest, the man entered an apartment only four doors away. Had he tried the three doors separating them before hammering on Slokker's?

As he wearily relocked his door and returned to bed Slokker resolved to discuss the matter with the concierge later in the morning. His strange neighbour required prompt attention, and possibly commitment to a psychiatric hospital. And Pieter would be very glad to do without any further nocturnal visits.

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The concierge, who was an elderly man with a dislike of Flemish Belgians, ran his fingers over the white stubble on his chin. An unlit Gauloise hung from his lower lip.

'He came from Apartment 205, you say?'

'Yes. I don't know his name. The man's in need of treatment. I think he could be dangerous; to himself, if not to others.'

'I find that hard to believe. The gentleman who occupies that room is Monsieur Deschamps. A little odd, I'll grant you, but he's careful about his appearance and always gives me a good tip. I haven't seen him for a few weeks, but then he's always liked his privacy. Lately he's even taken to having his food delivered.' He scratched his chin. 'Though I haven't seen the delivery boy for a while. . . . But I wouldn't . . .'

Slokker interrupted the old man's monologue.

'Well, I am not leaving until you come upstairs with me and see for yourself. If you won't I'll complain to the landlord.'

The old man got to his feet with a long-suffering expression, and took down from its hook the duplicate key for Apartment 205.

A few moments later the two were climbing the spiral staircase to the fourth floor, the concierge grumbling as they made their way upwards. He

paused several times to draw on the now lit cigarette. It seemed to Slokker that he took as long as he possibly could.

‘You’re a medical student, you say? Well, let me tell you, Monsieur, that I haven’t much time for doctors. One of you scoundrels gave me six months to live and that was more than twenty years ago! What do you think of that, eh?’

‘What I’d like to know is what you meant when you said that this Deschamps was a little odd.’

‘Odd, eh, odd? Well, isn’t everyone a bit odd in their own way? When you’re as old as I am, perhaps you’ll realise that too. Odd? I meant nothing by it. Only that when I helped Monsieur Deschamps move his belongings upstairs, oh, when was it?’ He had stopped again. ‘Yes, when I helped him I happened to glance at his books.’

‘And?’

‘Well, they were unusual books. Things about premonitions, fortune telling, magic and the like. He seemed ashamed of them. Oh and some on black magic! So what do you make of that, eh, my young Flemish friend! Eh? Black magic!’

At which statement the concierge laughed. This set off a violent coughing fit. He threw his cigarette to the floor and insisted they wait a while for him to recover.

When they finally reached 205 the concierge at first tapped gently on the door, calling out to Deschamps in a regretful tone, glancing disapprovingly at Slokker all the while. But there was no answer, even when the medical student shouted through the keyhole and they had both banged uninhibitedly on the door. The commotion had attracted a small crowd of people in the hallway.

‘Don’t you have a key?’ Slokker asked the concierge.

‘But he might just be out.’ The old man replied grumpily.

‘Open the door and don’t be such a fool! Something might have happened to him!’ said a large, powdered lady cradling a white fluffy cat. She seemed to have more influence over the concierge than Slokker because to the medical student’s annoyance he bowed obsequiously and mumbled ‘Of course, of course, as you wish, Madame,’ before drawing the key from his pocket and inserting it in the lock.

The concierge had some difficulty in dissuading the crowd from following them into the apartment, especially the powdered woman with the cat, but once they had been shooed away, he and Slokker made their way cautiously down the uncarpeted hall and into the main living room. The floor was littered with papers and discarded food cartons. Thick dust lay over everything. Clothes, old newspapers and books were heaped on the floor and Pieter and the concierge had to navigate between them carefully. The curtains were half-drawn and a stale, sickly odour permeated the room. Behind the curtains, newspapers had been stuck to the windowpanes creating a permanent yellow twilight. A brief further inspection revealed that the other rooms were in a similar state of chaos and neglect. There was no sign of Deschamps.

And then they came across a tiny, windowless room. Its walls had been draped with black velvet curtains. There was a large mirror on the wall, either side of which the curtains were parted, and a single chair with an electric lamp positioned just behind it. The bulb was of a very low wattage and the legs of the chair had been sawn off so that it tilted backwards. If you sat on the chair, you found yourself gazing directly into the mirror, only, judging from its height, it would not be possible to see one's own reflection, only the mirror image of the darkness of the room.

'Eh, my friend? What do you make of it?' asked the concierge.

Slokker found himself completely lost for words.

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Whatever had happened to Deschamps remained a mystery. It seemed that he had abandoned his rooms and Pieter Slokker was the last person to have seen him. The concierge reported Deschamps' disappearance to the police and his name was added to their list of missing persons.

As the days passed, no more information was forthcoming. Deschamps had paid his rent for the month ahead, and the landlord decided that the rooms would remain unlet for this period, just in case his tenant should return. However, at the end of the month, the apartment would be re-advertised.

Shortly after his neighbour's disappearance, Slokker, who, when not being awoken by deranged neighbours usually enjoyed a good night's sleep,

found himself experiencing a bout of sleepwalking. One night he woke to discover that he had left his rooms, wandered along the corridor, and was trying the door of Apartment 205. This pattern of sleepwalking repeated itself two or three times every night of the following week and finally Slokker was forced to resort to keeping himself in bed by means of an elaborate system of cords with which he bound his ankles to the bedstead. He tied the knots in so complicated a fashion that any attempt to unravel them in his sleep usually resulted in failure. He often awoke in pain, his fingertips sore and bleeding from picking at the unyielding rope.

Perhaps inevitably, Pieter's studies began to suffer. After two weeks of exhaustion, he began to feel that the only way to put a stop to his unconscious compulsion was to find a way to re-enter Deschamps' apartment. The next day, while a deliveryman was usefully distracting the concierge with a disputed receipt, Slokker managed to 'borrow' the duplicate key from the hall office. He pressed it carefully into a tablet of wax he had prepared by melting a couple of candles.

As it turned out, having a copy key made was an easy matter. The key cutter in the booth on the Boulevard asked no awkward questions, and he made the key there and then, while the medical student waited on the street. Later that evening, when the building was quiet, Slokker made his way along the corridor. He carried with him a torch so that he would not risk attracting any unwelcome attention by switching on the lights.

The interior of the apartment was even more desolate by night. Nothing had been touched, and the only change was that a thicker layer of dust now covered the debris littering the floorboards.

Slokker flashed the torch around, making shadows start out from the peeling walls. Once in the windowless room he switched on the low-wattage lamp behind the chair and extinguished his torch. He sat down on the angled seat and directed his gaze to the mirror. The reflection showed only the velvet curtains behind him. He was looking into a rectangular slab of perfect blackness.

At first he focused on the surface of the mirror, but, because there was nothing of any interest to look at, he allowed his gaze gradually to relax. For some time nothing happened, but then the focus of his eyes altered and he seemed to be staring beyond the mirror at a distant object hidden in its depths. Slokker's very gaze seemed to be bringing forth something from the

darkness. Whatever it was, and he could not be sure there was really anything there, it was surrounded by a silvery-white glare. The object seemed to come closer the more he concentrated on it, and for a moment he had the feeling that something or someone was looking back at him, albeit from far away. Slokker could not be sure whether the distant vision was merely a product of his own imagination. The whole process was exhausting, and he found that he was developing a throbbing headache. Finally, he gave up the exercise and, as quietly as he could, made his way out of the rooms into the corridor.

Once back in his own apartment Slokker was astonished to discover that four hours had passed. He slumped gratefully onto his bed and for once fell immediately into a deep, untroubled sleep.

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For the first few nights after this experience Slokker suffered no further episodes of sleepwalking. It seemed that his plan had worked and that his strange need to visit the windowless room had been sated. He gave up the practice of binding himself to the bed with cords, but on the fourth night, he awoke to find himself crawling on his hands and knees along the corridor towards 205.

Although he had discovered the cure for his somnambulism Slokker was loath to resort to it again. His visit to the room with the mirror had been troubling and unpleasant and although he was inclined to regard the far-off face in the mirror as a delusion brought on by tiredness, he retained a fear of it that he found hard to dismiss. However, he needed uninterrupted sleep if he were to continue his studies successfully, so the following morning he let himself into the abandoned apartment. This time he began a search of Deschamps' rooms in the hope of discovering something to help him understand the purpose of the windowless room.

Deschamps' books did not seem to have been arranged in any particular order. They were piled in corners and scattered randomly across the floor of the living room. However, as he examined them more closely, it appeared to Pieter that those most recently read had been piled around the base of a folding canvas chair. Deschamps seemed to have made notes about these on

pieces of scrap paper, which he had then inserted into the volumes. He had also scrawled notes directly in the margins of some texts.

Contrary to the concierge's assertion, very few of the books dealt with black magic, and these were riddled with dismissive remarks in pencil: *'in other words an excuse for sexual self-gratification*', '*the desire for power over others by means of a system of obfuscation*', '*drug-related hallucinations*', '*auto-suggestion and hypnosi*s' etc. The texts that appeared to have held the most fascination for Deschamps were those stacked closest to the chair. Here Slokker found a series of privately-printed pamphlets dating from the early 1890s. He noticed that the pamphlets were all stamped with the official seal of the Bibliotheque Nationale: no doubt Deschamps had furthered his occult researches by stealing from a public library. Slokker sat down in the canvas chair to read them.

It seemed that they concerned the use of a chamber called a 'psychomantium'. The pamphlets had been issued by an obscure sect of psychic researchers, and they were illustrated with photographic records of experiments conducted in rooms much like the one that Deschamps had fashioned in his apartment. The photographs were evidently of long exposure and showed blurred and distorted images of a series of faces apparently reflected in a mirror. The pamphlets claimed these to be 'the faces of the dead.' In truth, the quality of the reproduction was so poor that they rather resembled crudely fashioned dolls' heads in various states of disrepair. Nevertheless, the accompanying texts stated that these were authentic visitations and that the mirror served as a doorway to the afterlife.

Once more, Slokker felt compelled to enter the windowless room. He turned on the feeble lamp, sat down before the mirror, and attempted to clear his mind. He stared into the void.

For the first few minutes he saw nothing. He began to relax, and then felt a prickling sensation at the back of his neck, and he shivered as he realised that once again he could see the silvery-white glare within the depths of reflected darkness. And then he saw that within the glare was a face. The longer Slokker stared, the closer it seemed to approach, and the brighter became the glare, as if a camera lens were zooming in inexorably. He did not know how long he stared; his senses were becoming confused. That the face was that of a dead man Slokker had no doubt. The yellowish tinge of the bloodless skin betrayed that much, and the eyes of the

apparition did not blink. But what caused him to overturn the chair and stagger out of the psychomantium in a blind panic was that the face he saw in the mirror was his own.

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It was not difficult for Slokker to obtain the drugs he needed to calm his nerves, but he did it as discreetly as he could, for his medical studies were in a state close to chaos and his failure to attend seminars and lectures was attracting comment. There was really no alternative, though, because the strain was becoming unbearable.

In one of the pamphlets that he had not read the previous night, and which he seemed to have had the presence of mind to bring with him to his rooms, Slokker found a short history of the group calling themselves 'La Société des âmes mortes'. They had made their first investigations into the afterlife by means of séances but had dismissed this line of enquiry after a series of encounters with fraudulent mediums. They had then explored the 'science' of ouija boards and claimed that their subsequent use of psychomantic chambers was a consequence of a spirit message thereby received. The first experiments had been uneventful and the techniques they had borrowed from the psychic literature of the time, involving the sitter concentrating on photographs and handling the effects of the deceased, produced results that were easy to dismiss as mere fancy.

Just after the Society proposed the abandoning of this new line of research, one of the sitters began to make extraordinary claims about having communicated with the dead. He insisted that a horrible secret had been revealed to him. Investigation of the transcripts he had made whilst experiencing the visitations revealed disturbing hints about the nature of consciousness after death. But the most extraordinary claim of all was that he had begun to communicate with his own dead spirit. However, he would not be drawn on the exact nature of these exchanges. What was apparent was that his mental state had suffered a dramatic collapse and, only a few weeks later, he was found to have committed suicide. There were those in the Society who followed in his wake, unable to resist the lure of the forbidden knowledge that their dead selves might impart to them. Those who did not succumb to the temptation abandoned all association with

psychic research. There were hints that the revelations experienced were based on the concept that it is the dead that sustain the structure of the waking world through their dreams and that all living existence is illusory.

When Slokker came to a part of the pamphlet featuring a sepia photograph, one hundred years old, of the members of the Société des âmes mortes, he nearly dropped the thing in fright. Even had there not been a list of names beneath the photograph, he would have recognised the face of the man in the second row at the extreme right. It was that of Deschamps, or some identical ancestor. But this was not the worst of it. The other faces also seemed familiar, though they were blurred. One had a curious resemblance to the old concierge. And sitting next to him was someone whose identity could scarcely be mistaken. It was Slokker's own face that stared back at him from the photograph.

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Although Slokker tried to dismiss these strange events and revelations from his mind, he found that his nightly compulsion to return and gaze into the mirror of the psychomantium was overwhelming. The drugs helped him to sleep and he still had recourse to binding his feet to the bed, but events soon overtook him, despite all of his precautions.

One morning, just as he had finished shaving, the mirror above the sink filled with the silvery-white glare. Slokker's normal, bleary-eyed reflection was replaced with an image of his leering corpse-face. Its eyes had sunk deep into black-rimmed sockets and the yellowish skin stretched tight over the skull, drawing the lips back from teeth made prominent by the flesh's decay. Hair was plastered down horribly across its mottled forehead. The face was close enough to touch and though it materialised for only a moment Slokker could trace each lineament of decay. It seemed to lean forward towards him, confidentially, and whispered:

'You are simply a dream . . . and I am tired of dreaming.'

Then it was gone.

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After that, Slokker could not bear to be alone. For hours, he tramped the streets of the city, seeking people, crowds. He sat in cafés during the afternoon and mingled with revellers in the evenings, but despite all his efforts to join in he was gripped by the idea that all this was merely scenery, abandoned backstage.

While he was out drinking himself into a state of oblivion in a bar close to Sacre Coeur, a group of his fellow medical students came across him, slumped over a corner table. They pressed their company upon him, enquiring after his health with real concern. Slokker was glad of their attentions and lost himself in evasion and claims that he would soon return to the University and complete his studies. But as his drunken elation reached its height, when even he half-believed that his fears were caused by nothing more than nervous exhaustion that would be overcome with time, he happened to glance at a mirror hanging on the wall behind one of his friend's heads. There again was the silvery brightness and his dead, decaying face twisted into an expression of malign contempt. But this time it was not a momentary visitation; the image remained. And he thought that within the laughter around him he could hear a mocking quality, as if it were at his own expense. The dead face too, seemed to be laughing, and Slokker's friends exchanged anxious glances as his own laughter turned to screams of horror. He got to his feet and pushed through the throng, shoving them roughly aside, until he was out into the streets and the Parisian night.

From then on all mirrors seemed to have become contaminated. In the darkness even shop windows glowed with the silver-white glare. When he got back to his apartment he smashed the mirrors in his rooms and covered the windows with newspaper to mask any reflections.

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Shortly after Slokker had begun to retreat from the world he received some startling information from the concierge. Coming across him in his office after a trip out to buy some bread, the old man had beckoned Pieter over. It seemed that Deschamps' body had finally been discovered. A police boat had found it floating miles downstream in the Seine, weeks of decomposition having brought the corpse to the surface. It seemed that the

man had drowned himself. Apartment 205 was to be let out again, after extensive redecoration, of course.

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Slokker's mental condition continued to deteriorate. Some of the medical students who had heard about the encounter in the bar attempted to visit him, but he refused to let them in. Even his old lecturer came to the apartment once, but his initial sympathy soon turned to threats of calling in the authorities when faced with Slokker's stubborn refusal to communicate. But Slokker viewed all these visitors as he would a series of shadows. He was afraid that the dead face in the mirror was now really set on his shoulders, despite the fact that his sense of touch told him otherwise. It had been days since he'd looked in a mirror. Mornings and afternoons were taken up with sitting in the corner of his living room, watching the flies circling around the centre of the ceiling. And when it was night he would sit in the darkness and stare into space, hoping to lose himself in it. He no longer dared sleep. Even after binding himself to the bed he found that the once laborious process of disentanglement no longer awoke him. He had learned to untie the most complex knots whilst still asleep.

Exhausted, emaciated, Slokker gradually lost the strength to resist the silent summons that drew him to the psychomantium. Soon, he knew he would give himself over to the compulsion to see again the dead face, and to listen to anything it might care to tell him.

Late one night, as he struggled to resist, Slokker remembered the landlord's intention to have Apartment 205 redecorated. Suddenly panic-stricken, he hurried from his rooms and down the short corridor. He could barely turn the key in the lock for fear that the psychomantium might not be there, but as he entered he saw that, although the painters' ladders and buckets had been stacked in the living room, work had yet to begin. He entered the windowless room and the dead face, appearing more decomposed than ever, was visible at once, as if it had been waiting for him. In the background was the familiar glare, like a continuous burst of lightning that reached only as far as the mirror's surface. Slokker sat in the darkness for hours as the rotting face with the whispering, hollow voice spoke to him. It urged him to cast aside his life, this mirage, this dream in

the decaying brains of the dead. It told of the grey, insensible void where the hopes and miseries of living existence have no meaning. ‘The world you move in is not real,’ the voice told Slokker. ‘The thoughts you think are not your own. Down in their mouldy graves, where the worms creep, the dead sustain the illusion you call life, waiting for you living beings to awaken in your narrow houses for all eternity. You will not die,’ said the voice, ‘for you have never been alive.’

And as Slokker gazed into the mirror he saw the revenant’s face smile almost benignly.

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Some days later the old concierge made his way up the stairs to Slokker’s apartment. He had not seen the young man during this period and although he didn’t particularly care for him, he was obliged to investigate, as the owners of the building had complained that the rent had not been paid. Up until now the concierge had ignored the various entreaties that Slokker’s medical friends had made; his distaste for their profession made him dismiss them as do-gooders. The old man had his own theory: Slokker had simply absconded in the last few days without a word to anyone in order to escape his debts. It had happened before. What else would you expect from foreign students?

No one answered his knocking so he entered, using the duplicate key. He had knocked quietly as he had no desire to attract the usual crowd of neighbours. Inside, the apartment looked much as it had before. The old concierge shuffled about, looking through Slokker’s personal effects. His clothes were still hanging in the wardrobe, and even his watch lay on the bedside table, next to the unmade bed. The mirror on the wardrobe door had been smashed and likewise the one above the sink in the bathroom. There were newspapers stuck to the windows, and he recognised the pile of pamphlets that Slokker must have taken from Deschamps’ apartment.

The concierge closed the door quietly and walked softly down the corridor to 205. He was doing his best not to feel jumpy, but he had to admit that the whole thing was odd. Once inside, he too noticed that although the painter’s equipment was there, they had yet to begin work. Nevertheless, it looked to him as if someone else, probably Slokker, had

been there before him. Things had been moved around. When he checked the windowless room he had to leave the door open so that he could see more clearly into the unlit chamber. There was an odd shadow in the gloom, and so he switched on the dim lamp.

The light revealed Slokker's starved body hanging in mid-air. The face was fixed in a grimace of pain and the lips were drawn back from clenched teeth. The sightless eyes were staring downwards at his reflection in the mirror. Slokker must have taken the belt from his trousers, fastened it around his neck, climbed up onto the chair and then attached the buckle to the obsolete light fitting on the ceiling. He had then kicked away the chair.

The concierge made himself turn away from the sight and his first thought was of the nasty reputation another suicide might lend the building. First Monsieur Deschamps (though he had at least had the decency to end his life elsewhere) and now this young idiot! He closed the door behind him, ensured that it was securely locked once more and made his way back to his office downstairs. As he sat waiting for the gendarmes' arrival, he realised that he must have picked up some of the pamphlets from Slokker's rooms. They were there in front of him, on the desk. He must have put them down there before he'd telephoned the authorities.

That night, after they had taken Slokker's body away, the concierge was troubled by a dream about being trapped in a dark, windowless room.

The Impasse

The Ulymas Organisation was located in a sprawl of dilapidated buildings on the far west side of the city. None of the structures were more than four floors high and the exteriors were of bland, whitewashed brickwork, the paint flaking away from the walls. The windows were barred on the outside and always dirty, as if to deter those within from seeing the world outside. This neglect lent the business an air of unimportance, as if the work done there was subsidiary. Were it not for the dribble of workers that made their way to the place in the mornings and crept away in the evenings it might even have been assumed that the whole complex was derelict.

The employees arrived by way of the underground train line, the terminus of which, most of the time, served only those who worked for the Organisation. Aside from some run-down shops opposite the office complex, the area was a wasteland of gutted buildings and rubble.

David Cohen was travelling to the Ulymas premises from his digs near the centre of the city to begin his first day of work. He assumed that the other passengers on the underground train were fellow employees. This far west and so close to the terminus, there was no other destination to which rush-hour travellers would be bound. He noted their sullen faces and shabby business suits. Many of the men had not shaven and the women wore no makeup. To all appearances they were making only an absent-minded attempt to conform to accepted standards of office attire and appearance. Cohen himself was dressed smartly in a black three-piece suit and was clean-shaven.

For his interview a week previously he had travelled on a deserted mid-morning train. At first he had been alarmed by the state of the Organisation's headquarters, with its atmosphere of impending abandonment. It did not look to him as though they would be able to offer him a position with any future. But the interview seemed to have gone well and he was promised a better salary than he had expected. The two interviewers had been somewhat vague figures, and neither had asked him any particularly probing or awkward questions. He could remember little of them except that they sat in the shadows at the back of the room. They had not elaborated on the exact nature of his duties, but had intimated that they

would be concerned with an area with which he was familiar, intellectual property rights, although he was not told in which particular sphere he would be required to operate. Despite being au fait with various broadcast and publishing media in which such rights are usually exploited, Cohen had not heard of the Ulymas Organisation. When, before his interview, he had undertaken background research he had been unable to find the company listed in any trade publication.

Cohen disembarked at the terminus and followed his dozen or so co-workers over the bridge spanning the railway line and then along a series of underpasses that led out into the road opposite the business premises. None of the employees spoke to one another, but simply filed silently along, with heads slightly bowed, through the gates to the Organisation.

Cohen had been advised which building he should enter upon his arrival and this proved to be at the heart of the complex, some distance from the Personnel Department where his interview had been conducted. He wandered between sullen-looking flat-roofed buildings and across overgrown courtyards. Cohen could only marvel at the sheer enormity of the neglect. Many of the windows were laced with cracks, and some had been smashed. Doors to abandoned exterior storerooms hung from their hinges. Many of the paving slabs were broken, with weeds flourishing in the gaps and on those corners and edges where human tread was less frequent.

Other than the sign outside indicating that it housed the executive offices, the building in which Cohen was to work was indistinguishable from the others. Inside was a foyer and behind the reception desk sat a bored-looking security guard gazing blankly at an array of CCTV screens behind the counter. Cohen told him who he was and the man telephoned a number. After what seemed an age he advised Cohen that Mr Franklin would be down to collect him shortly.

In due course a portly man appeared.

‘Franklin,’ he introduced himself without enthusiasm, offering a damp, limp hand and refusing to make eye-contact. He was in his sixties and was dressed in a grubby grey suit.

‘Cohen,’ replied the new recruit. ‘It’s good . . .’ But Franklin had turned his back and was already moving. Rather put out, Cohen followed, noticing

as they walked that the man's long white hair trailed down over the back of his dirty collar.

'I am your immediate superior,' said the man as Cohen attempted to walk alongside him. The narrow corridor, with its threadbare green carpet, was not wide enough to allow them to walk together, so he fell back again and followed.

'How long have you worked here?' Cohen asked. The man continued on without turning round.

'I have been here since the Ulymas Organisation began,' he replied, now leading the younger man up a tiled stairwell. The layout of the building seemed erratic, almost haphazard, with certain of the corridors appearing to curve so that it was not always possible to see their end. Cohen was dismayed to find that the interior of the building was as run-down as its exterior, with grimy strip lighting providing the only illumination in the corridors. He hoped that the offices themselves would be brighter and better maintained, but he did not feel optimistic.

On their journey he was cheered to see approaching them a young woman dressed in a white smock wheeling what appeared to be a tea trolley. She paused to look at Cohen as the two men passed and it seemed to him that there was a look of pity in her gaze, mingled with a certain unease.

'You will work in here,' Franklin opened the door to a depressingly small room. Cohen walked in feeling even more despondent. His new office was cramped, with storage space afforded by wall-mounted shelves that reached up to its ceiling. It was far taller than it was wide, having a floor-area of perhaps twelve square feet, while its height was some fifteen feet. As it was located in the middle of the building, on the first floor, its only view was into a light-well, with a brick wall opposite, covered with lichen. Cohen's spirits fell yet further when he realised that he would be unable to see even this limited view when he was sitting at his desk, as the small, barred, dirty window was shoulder-high and would be behind him while he worked. He was going to have to try hard to stay positive, he decided. Stretching up on tiptoe he peered through the grimy panes. He could see that there was a basement level below the ground floor.

'You won't be disturbed,' Franklin said, still standing by the door. 'Few people will need to see you. Someone will come to deliver your paperwork, and they'll take it away when it's finished.'

‘I wouldn’t mind seeing a few people!’ Cohen forced a smile.

‘Twice a day the woman we passed earlier will come by to serve refreshments.’

‘Just as long as she remembers I’m here,’ Cohen replied. He could not help thinking that this office was a cul-de-sac in a labyrinth.

He turned to the desk. Sitting on it was a very old computer and next to it a set of trays, the top one of which was laden with folders crammed with papers.

‘These files,’ Franklin explained, ‘relate to the intellectual property cases the Ulymas Organisation wishes you to handle. What you have there should keep you busy in your first week. They all concern serious infringements of Ulymas copyrights that require urgent action.’

‘Is there a company policy on the nature of our response to infringement?’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Is there a tendency towards simply issuing a warning. Or do we threaten legal action? Is legal action often necessary?’

‘That will be left to your own judgement. Examine the cases on your desk and let them guide you.’

Cohen reached for the top file, and when he looked up again he found that Franklin had gone. He switched on the ancient computer and settled into the battered office chair, which he was relieved to find was moderately comfortable. Although he was concentrating on the papers in front of him, he was aware that no bootstrap data was appearing on the screen beside him. He looked up at the monitor and discovered to his bewilderment that a mass of crumpled papers had been stuffed inside it. They were backlit by an internal bulb.

He bent forward and pulled out a screwed-up sheet of yellowed paper. It was covered in writing of a kind. He examined others and they were the same. The handwritten notes had no punctuation or paragraphs and were simply a series of non-sequiturs, ramblings or repetitive phrases. But there did seem to be a theme, of sorts. The name ‘Ulymas’ appeared over and over again and invariably in association with such words as ‘terror’, ‘horrible’, ‘infinite’ and ‘omniscient’. Could this be a practical joke perpetrated by his new work colleagues? It was hard to equate his dour new superior, Franklin, with this kind of prank. Perhaps the computer, even his

‘office’ was a joke, but a quick check outside the door confirmed that there was no stifled giggling from the corridor. Indeed, the corridor was deserted.

David sat back down warily and returned his attention to the contents of the folders. The first of these contained various documents relating to a dispute of which even a cursory examination suggested that the position taken by the Ulymas Organisation was legally and morally untenable. Franklin had left a note on the folder intimating that this case was for Cohen’s information only, it having been settled recently.

It seemed that a writer, one whose book had been published several months ago, had received warning that he had infringed the copyright of the Organisation by incorporating certain metaphysical speculations into his work. These speculations, it was argued, could not possibly have originated anywhere other than the Ulymas Organisation. Although they did not make the claim that the infringement had been anything other than accidental, the Organisation had insisted that the exploitation of what they termed ‘psychical leakage’ had to be halted. The book in question was a collection of pulp horror stories entitled *The Darkness Closes In*. There was a copy of the paperback in the file and when Cohen picked it up he saw that the author’s name had been completely blacked out on the cover, title and copyright pages. It was likewise deleted from all of the correspondence. He flicked through the book, noticing that one story in particular had been highlighted in several places with a yellow marker pen. His new employers had evidently taken great exception to the ludicrous denouement of the story where the protagonist had his brains devoured by a huge spider. The poor man’s remains were left dangling and suspended in an abandoned room with cobwebs spun by the arachnid radiating from the empty pan of his skull.

Cohen did not know how the case had been concluded, but surely it could not have been in the Organisation’s favour.

He sank back into his chair and drew a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. He lit one as he read through the rest of the interminable correspondence. There could be no doubt that the whole case had been an utter waste of time. He wanted this to be a part of the same practical joke but it was too detailed, too earnest and only too evidently authentic.

Leafing through more of the files, Cohen found that the main thrust of his predecessor’s arguments seemed to be the Organisation’s ownership of

thought, as if human consciousness were itself a facet of intellectual property rights. From the correspondence Cohen could see that his superiors, including Franklin, endorsed this attitude. There were even positive comments from Ulymas himself, the founder and Managing Director of the Organisation.

As he sat smoking, Cohen tried to make up his mind what to do. It was his first day in the job and Franklin had told him that he had free rein to handle affairs as he saw fit. In Cohen's professional opinion all of the cases he had looked at so far were fit only for the wastepaper basket. Why so much time had been wasted upon them was beyond his comprehension.

In the next few cases he examined it seemed that the Organisation was claiming retrospective infringement of copyright. That is, they were asserting that certain works written before the company's formation had exploited and plagiarised ideas over which Ulymas asserted absolute ownership. The last two cases were concerned with infringements of copyrights that had not yet occurred but which they regarded as inevitable. Invariably these claims centred on fictional works of a bizarre nature. The Organisation's justification for such outlandish declarations lay in a convoluted refutation of the concept of linear time. As far as Cohen could grasp the proposition, as set out in the paperwork before him, sequential events were considered to be a mere illusion. Ulymas argued the view that time in fact radiated like a spiral or a web. From this, his predecessor had affirmed that what memories we possess are not of events themselves, but of the last memory we had of that event. The more we remember, the further we are from actuality. He had maintained that the passage of time is only a trick of the memory, an infinity of déjà vu, the past a creation of our minds, a spiral without a centre.

Cohen found that his own mind was reeling. His dilemma was acute. All the evidence suggested that he was working for an organisation which, to say the least, lacked the slightest grip on reality. Should he speak to Franklin? It seemed pointless; the man had personally endorsed many of his predecessor's fantastic claims of infringement. Was he really expected to write further letters in a similar vein and carry on perpetrating the charade?

Perhaps it would be best to delay any decision until he had spoken to some of his other colleagues in the department. Franklin had given him no indication that he was to be formally introduced to anybody else, so he

decided to find them for himself. As the best part of the morning had now passed and it was nearing lunchtime, he left his office in search of company.

He peered through the glazed panel in his neighbour's door but the room was empty. The second office along appeared similarly vacant, but the third revealed a single occupant hunched over a computer screen. He knocked on the door with the intention of introducing himself, but the man gazed up at him blankly through the square of glass before turning back to his task like an automaton. Cohen tried the same approach at several more doors before, finally, one worker acknowledged him with a feeble wave of the hand, beckoning him in. Even then, he could not help thinking that the response was lethargic and indifferent, as if the man was drugged.

His name, he told Cohen, was Mr Kromer. He was middle-aged, with curling black hair, an unkempt moustache and dark, sunken eyes. His small, slight form was clothed in a charcoal-grey suit that was worn at the cuffs. Cohen tried to temper his enquiry about the company's bizarre interpretation of copyright law with small talk. He informed Kromer cheerfully that this was his first day, but Kromer only smiled wanly and finally asked politely but coldly exactly what Cohen wanted, as there were urgent matters awaiting his attention.

Cohen then had no choice but to tell Kramer directly about the quandary in which he found himself. Much to his surprise, Kromer, who listened intently and without expression, did not seem at all perturbed by the situation. When Cohen had finished Kromer explained that it was part of company policy and that, given time, Cohen would come to understand the full justice of their claims. As for the state of his computer, Kromer seemed unable to grasp the reason for Cohen's confusion. He gestured to his own machine, and Cohen saw that it was in the same state as his, merely the shell of a monitor stuffed with crumpled documents. Kromer explained that the information contained therein changed on a daily basis, with fresh paperwork being inserted every morning.

Cohen returned to his room. Despite being utterly confused by the sheer waste of effort and time his work seemed to involve, he resolved that, as his employers were paying him so well, he would seek to fulfil his obligations. He spent the rest of the day composing letters defending imagined, indefensible future infringements, and was relieved to find that the task became easier as he went on. It was almost like writing a novel, Cohen

supposed, and he used all his skill and imagination in inventing a nebulous rationale for the Organisation's position. Towards the end of the day he found that he was writing at great speed, and that unbidden yet alluring extravagances relating to 'psychical leakage' had been incorporated into his longhand correspondence.

At six p.m. Cohen put the files into his pending tray and prepared to leave. He couldn't recall whether he had managed to have lunch that day, but was sure that the woman with the tea trolley had not passed by. He had a final cigarette and stood staring out of the small, barred window at the brick wall opposite. It was dark outside. At the edge of his field of vision he caught sight of Kromer's reflection. Kromer was standing in the doorway, now wearing a long black overcoat and a battered soft-brimmed hat.

'Are you about ready to leave, Cohen? Might we make the journey together?'

Cohen gladly gave his consent. He had spoken to no one during the afternoon and could do with the company.

During the walk back through the labyrinthine corridors of the executive building, Cohen found Kromer more forthcoming than he had been earlier.

'You were asking about our approach to copyright matters?'

'Yes. I find it hard to believe that we can legitimately claim absolute ownership of so many ideas and concepts.'

'Well, Ulymas only wishes to claim ownership of that which rightfully belongs to the Organisation.'

'And reading through the files I was surprised that so much of it deals specifically with the . . . well . . . with the weird and horrible.'

'I was as bemused as you on my first day,' Kromer was sympathetic. 'I remember feeling a sense of, shall we say, 'absurdity' at the Organisation's claims. But as time has passed, my scepticism has faded. You know, I once received certain memoranda from Ulymas himself . . .' He stopped and appeared to be recalling the event with great pleasure. 'They were written in atrociously crabbed handwriting, but they specifically addressed my concerns. In fact, they more than addressed my concerns.'

'In what way?'

'They were responses to thoughts that I had not dared to share with anyone else. And the memoranda from Ulymas were always posted within

my computer monitor. The words were written in spirals from the inside outwards . . .'

Cohen interrupted:

'You can't be suggesting that Ulymas has some kind of telepathic intuition?'

'Why not?'

'It seems much more likely that he spies on his employees.'

'You are not seriously suggesting that he has hidden cameras?'

'No, I suppose not.'

Whilst they talked, Cohen noted the expressionless faces of the other Ulymas employees staring blankly ahead as they made their way homewards. He had the sensation that they were listening to his conversation with Kromer, or at least absorbing it somehow. Kromer seemed to sense Cohen's unease.

'There are no secrets at the Ulymas Organisation,' he explained with a sad smile. 'The more one works here, the less independent thought seems to matter.'

'Have you ever met Ulymas? In the flesh?' he asked Kromer.

'I haven't had that pleasure. I don't know anyone who has. In fact, some of our colleagues enjoy their own little joke that he doesn't exist at all!'

It seemed even harder to believe that the Ulymas Organisation was a place where anyone made jokes. Cohen realised that they had been walking through the corridors for rather a long time without actually getting anywhere.

'Is this really the way out?' he asked Kromer.

'Ah, now that's an awkward question to answer. You know, I'm not sure that I remember ever having found a way out,' he replied.

'What do you mean?' Cohen knew that he was beginning to betray some of his nervousness and exasperation.

'Just that. I don't know that I've ever found the exit. It's a funny thing. I try every evening, and I somehow find myself the following day in my own office, but with no memory of what has happened in the intervening hours.'

Cohen stopped walking. Kromer looked surprised:

'You have to keep trying. You know, just once there might be an exception.'

'But there never has been yet?'

‘Well, no.’

‘And that doesn’t worry you?’

‘I suppose it does. The implication is that all employees of the Organisation have been denied the right to any existence beyond the fulfilment of those duties that the company has deemed fitting for them.’ Kromer looked almost fearful as he drew breath and continued his speculations. ‘Do you know, I can remember nothing of my former life, except for a vague feeling that I might have once, somehow, acted against the Ulymas Organisation in some way.’

He smiled bravely, and looked furtively around before continuing. ‘Perhaps working here is a form of retribution. Most of the employees I’ve spoken to can’t recall just how they came to work for the Organisation in the first place.’

Cohen took Kromer’s arm.

‘Look, come on, this can’t be right. You’re feeling a bit tired, that’s all. Come with me. We’ll find the way out together.’

But in attempting to recall the location of the exit, Cohen was finding that his own memory of his journey in to work that morning was beginning to fade. They wandered from corridor to corridor somewhat aimlessly, occasionally passing others in an apparently similar state of confused disorientation. In fact, one fellow worker gave Cohen a horrible start. He had only caught a glimpse of the face as the man glanced up at him, but it had seemed to him that the man had no eyes, only hollow sockets stuffed with crumpled-up shreds of paper.

Finally Cohen and Kromer found the tiled stairwell that led down to the foyer. The security guard was not at his desk and the windows were shuttered. They looked through the trellis doors but could see only a black and starless void. The building seemed poised on a precipice above it. There was nothing else there. Nothing at all.

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By the time they arrived back at Kromer’s office, Cohen’s memory of what had transpired was becoming hazy, so much so that he was inclined to feel that he must have been dreaming. Kromer seemed to have slipped back into

his former lethargy and was once more concerning himself with paperwork.

Cohen watched him sit down in front of his computer monitor. On the desk in front of it was a sheet of paper that Kromer must have scrawled on earlier.

‘But what have I written here?’ he asked Cohen.

Cohen stepped away from the table. He was suddenly fearful.

Back in his own office, he saw at once that the papers he’d been working on had been taken away. Franklin had left him a memorandum stating that he was not pleased with Cohen’s attempts at letter writing, indeed, he had felt obliged to refer the matter to his own superior.

Cohen looked down at his suit and found that it had become crumpled and soiled. His chin was unshaven. Just how long he had been here it was now impossible to tell. Moreover, it didn’t seem to matter. He finished reading the memorandum from Franklin and read the words: ‘It is time that we took punitive action.’

From somewhere back along the corridor Cohen heard quiet laughter, but there was no humour in it.

Colony

Flat to rent. One bedroom. Ravel Street.
Very quiet neighbourhood. £100 p.w.
Contact Mr Mangan. Eves.

There was also a telephone number. I made an appointment with the gravel-voiced Mangan to view the flat that same evening. I had been looking for somewhere new for months, but it had been difficult to find anywhere in the part of town I preferred. I had discovered the quarter by accident during the course of one of my many night-time explorations. The shabby streets that wound down a steep hill fascinated me, and at the bottom was a wide black river. By night there appeared to be nothing beyond the river; no sign of human habitation, no street or house lights. When I visited the quarter by day I found that there was an expanse of desolate marsh, stretching far into the distance.

I knew of Ravel Street as I had passed through it several times during my nocturnal wanderings. Like the other streets on the hill it possessed the usual twin rows of amputated trees with branch-stumps on the trunks. The houses themselves varied widely in size and design, although all were run-down. Several were rather grandiose with gabled roofs and verandahs while others were single-storey buildings, some little more than shacks. Many looked long-abandoned, and those occupants who remained seemed down-at-heel, the dregs of society.

The meagre population of the quarter had evidently been there for generations, and, I came to understand, may once have been a distinct ethnic or religious group, although whatever god they had worshipped was long since discarded or forgotten. During my explorations I discovered what I thought must be examples of their abandoned temples, with the roofs fallen in and windows broken and gaping. The interiors were littered with relics and decaying religious incunabula, written in what I could only assume was an ancient, dead language.

I had first encountered the strange people of the quarter during my midnight expeditions into their neighbourhood and initially they ignored

me. Many of them were out on the streets at night, wandering like ghosts without any purpose or destination that I could determine. Perhaps, I felt, since their old customs and religious practices had fallen into abeyance, the common identity that bound them together and separated them from outsiders was informed mainly by a sense of shared loss? Perhaps it operated like a black hole at the centre of their mental universe, sucking them ever inwards? It was this theory that fuelled a desire in me to be no longer a mere tourist but a resident, and thus, perhaps, come to understand the mystery.

During my most recent night-visits I had begun to notice that, at last, those whom I encountered turned desolate eyes to meet mine, recognising me as one of their own. And in turn I felt a great empathy with these people. It was their alienated gaze, their white papier-mâché faces and the hopelessness in their expressions that gave them their fascination and distinguished them from those not of the quarter.

I arrived at Ravel Street at the appointed time and waited outside the address I had been given. It was a tall, decrepit house, five floors high, with arched narrow windows and a peaked roof sheltering gables on all four faces. Much of the exterior brickwork and plaster was crumbling and rotten. The windows of the first three floors were boarded up and those of the upper floors were dark. At the front of the building there was a decaying Doric portico.

I looked up and down the street, its amputated trees stark and pale in the moonlight. A brand new-looking car, with headlights blazing, was making its way slowly along the road. If this was Mangan then it was a fair bet that he did not live locally: there were very few cars parked here and they were invariably battered, obsolete models.

Sure enough the driver hailed me and pulled over to the kerb. A short man climbed out of the car, clad in a raincoat and a hat with a narrow brim. He must have been in his early fifties and what I could see of his face was furrowed with deep lines.

‘You are . . . Mr Conrad Smith, is it? To see the flat?’ he asked.

I nodded and shook his hand. He led me to the door of the house, and I asked if there were any other tenants.

‘Oh no, it’s been unoccupied for some time. At the moment only the attic flat is ready. The other flats will be renovated soon.’

He unlocked the front door and we passed into a hall, empty except for a large mirror. A slightly incongruous new carpet had been laid, however, which extended up the steep stairs. After six flights Mangan ushered me into the attic flat.

Although I would have taken the place whatever state it was in, such was my desire to live in the quarter, it was a pleasant surprise to find the rooms in good condition. The lounge and the kitchen had been knocked together into one large L-shaped room, while the bedroom was separate and at the back of the house. I liked the sloping ceilings and the solitary bay window beneath one of the gables. I would be able to sit at this window and gaze down and across the roofs to the black river and the marshes beyond. Mangan warned me that the house would be particularly cold during the winter (it was now October) and that the gas fire would have to be kept lit almost continuously. He advised me that the cost of heating was included in the rent.

We agreed on a six-month contract and I wrote a cheque for a deposit and the first month's rent there and then. He said that I would be free to move in as soon as the cheque cleared, and promised that when it did he would telephone me and I could collect the keys.

I requested a little more time to wander around and examine the rooms and Mangan went downstairs. What I actually did was to sit at the bay window and gaze out over the quarter, absorbing its melancholy atmosphere.

I do not know how long I sat there before he returned. He looked somewhat flustered, and said that he wished to lock up and go home. During the time he had been away I had discovered that the occupants of Ravel Street appeared to prefer darkness to light. I was intrigued that although I did not see a single source of illumination through any of the windows in the street below me, occasionally I glimpsed the movement of some pale, gaunt figure within.

A few days later I collected the keys from Mangan at his little office in the business sector and hired a driver with a small van to ferry my belongings and myself to my new home. When we reached the neighbourhood the driver expressed some surprise: he claimed never to have been there before, even though he said he was familiar with most of

the town. He peered through his windscreen in astonishment at the procession of dilapidated houses and sawn-off trees.

It was beginning to get dark when we arrived at Ravel Street but for a little extra money the man was willing to help me get my belongings up to the attic room, despite the climb. However, I sensed that he was anxious to leave before night fell and he fairly snatched the notes from my hand before driving off as quickly as his battered van would allow.

I watched his departure from the seat at the bay window. The atmosphere of the place seemed to have disturbed him. As darkness fell I watched the first of the night-walkers emerge onto the streets.

That night my sleep was disturbed by dreams in which I myself walked with those on the dark streets below.

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When I awoke the next morning I felt an almost irresistible apathy and it required all my willpower to get ready for work and walk up the hill through the now empty streets. I caught a bus to the offices where I worked, and I found that it caused me real pain as we left the quarter. Nothing on the outside seemed quite real and made only the vaguest of impressions on my consciousness, like a memory one would rather forget. I did my work competently enough but it held no interest for me, and I found myself repeatedly staring at the clock, aching for it to be time to return once again to Ravel Street.

My work colleagues noticed my distracted state and questioned me about its cause. I never discussed any aspect of my private life at the office, though, and they had no means of connecting my behaviour to my recent move.

I wondered if anyone else knew of the quarter's existence. Certainly it was never mentioned, but then it had no name that I was aware of.

At 5.30 p.m., as usual, I turned off my computer, collected my leather briefcase and prepared to leave. But in the corridor I was accosted by three colleagues who were insistent that I drink with them at a nearby pub. They wanted to celebrate one of the secretaries' birthdays and refused to accept my excuses. I made several efforts to get away from them during the course of the evening but these proved in vain. Some hours later I found myself out

on the street, intoxicated, accompanied by the secretary. I realised by her persistence that she wished to return home with me. She would be disappointed, I knew, but how was I to explain that human intimacy was no longer of any consequence in my life?

In the taxi I asked her where she lived so that I could tell the driver where to drop her, and her confident manner changed at once to a hurt uncertainty. She turned away, and we travelled the rest of the way in welcome silence. Once she had been safely despatched I told the driver to take me to a road some distance from home so that I could walk the rest of the way. The alcohol coursing through my veins had unsettled me, and I wanted to see what effect it would have on my perception of the quarter.

I walked through the streets, encountering from time to time the gaunt nightwalkers. The very shadows seemed alive that night, spilling like Indian ink across a scarred landscape. The trees appeared to be covered with white flesh rather than bark. In the vivid moonlight they resembled the trunks of decapitated bodies of titanic size, half-buried in an upright position.

I almost spoke to one of the quarter's inhabitants during my wanderings when I thought that his gaze had deliberately caught my own. But I was mistaken. The impression lasted only for the briefest of moments and then his eyes lowered, hopelessly, as if he were utterly desolate and alone.

I could not tell how much later it was that I found myself wandering along the towpath by the river. I passed rotten wooden warehouses and several houseboats moored along the banks. All of the boats were badly maintained and several were half-sunk; only pathetic shells remained, partly covered by the oily water, unburied corpses on a muddy battlefield. There were no lights on in the boats but as with the houses, an occasional ghostly face could be glimpsed within, peering outwards, before being swallowed once more by the dark interior.

Finding my way back to Ravel Street proved difficult. I could not find a direct route home, only a series of diversions and dead-ends. Above me shone the full moon, following me from behind the chimney-stacks and peaked roofs, bathing the vast marshes beyond in a ghastly light.

***

One aspect of the decayed houses of the quarter puzzled me greatly and continued to do so after I awoke the following morning, exhausted, with a pounding headache and fully clothed on my bed. I had noticed before that many of the houses were boarded-up, but now I had discovered that some of them were still occupied. As I had passed one such building I heard footsteps within, so I had listened at other windows and heard more footsteps and low, hollow, whispering voices speaking in a language I did not recognise. I could see into one house through a partly dislodged board, and there I caught a glimpse of a ravaged face.

It was dark and I realised that I'd slept through the sunlit hours. I removed my grubby clothes and washed myself. Although I had no appetite I felt that I should eat something and so made myself a meal from the odds and ends I had brought with me to the flat. I took my bowl over to the bay window and peered out into the night. To my astonishment I saw an unusual amount of illumination coming from one of the apartments in the house opposite. I could see dozens of candles burning behind a very large fanlight window.

I was intrigued, and found that I had a clear view into this flat since it was not only directly opposite but also only one floor below my own. The candles had been arranged in a circle on bare floorboards, and there was no sign of any furniture in the room. Then, just after I had lit my cigarette, a figure appeared. It was a naked woman with indescribably white flesh. Her face was obscured by very long black hair that hung straight down as far as her belly. She knelt in the middle of the candlelit circle and was reading from what looked like one of the incunabula I'd seen littering the abandoned temples.

I listened very carefully and thought that I could hear whispering. As I strained to hear I lent forward to obtain a better view out of the open window. She threw back her head and her long black hair parted to reveal her face. It was that of a half-formed papier-mâché doll. The eyes were dead and vacant, as if nothing more than empty sockets.

I took another drag on the cigarette and then flicked it away. Her head dropped and the long black hair covered once more her awful face. The woman's chin now rested almost on her chest and the curtain of hair streamed over her knees. The whispering grew frantic. Then she let the incunabulum fall from her grasp and blew out the candles one at a time

until only the cold moonlight illuminated her body. I watched in horrified fascination as she began to crawl on her belly across the floorboards like a great white spider, her hair trailing behind her. I watched until the moon moved across the sky to a position where its light no longer fell on the scene. Yet even when it had passed and I could see no more, I could hear her whispering softly to herself. Was this the remnant of some ancient ritual, a corruption, perhaps, of the original form of worship of the quarter? It seemed to involve the extinction of light, perhaps signalling the end of hope and a descent into oblivion.

The following day I went to one of the abandoned temples and took an incunabulum for myself.

***

As the weeks wore on my life beyond the quarter seemed like a garish hallucination and I gradually lost all interest in it. I resigned from my job. My work had ceased to be intelligible anyway, and the company gratefully accepted my offer to quit. No one at the place seemed to regret my leaving. I think I must have become a disturbing figure to them. There were no surviving members of my family to avoid and what few friends I possessed did not pursue my company. It was easy to sever my ties with the outside world. I spent all my time, now, on the study of ancient languages; Zend, Aramaic, Akkadian, Hebrew, Etruscan, Phoenician; in the hope that they would help me in my attempt to decipher the occult language of the quarter.

One day I received a visit from the landlord, Mangan. It was quite early in the morning and the sound of his gravelly voice shouting, accompanied by the hammering at my door awakened me. He had obviously let himself into the building and had only failed to get into the flat because of the new bolt I'd installed.

I asked him to wait while I dressed and then unlocked the door. He took one look at me and backed off, but he lingered on the stairs, his eyes flicking over the multitude of books and paper.

'Um . . . Mr Smith . . . your rent . . . it's a month late. Not acceptable. You must pay or get out.'

I remembered that I had put some money in an envelope somewhere and I retrieved it from its hiding place and handed it over. Mangan opened it and counted the notes inside.

'Mr Smith, this is six month's rent in advance. You want to stay that long?'

I nodded absently.

'Ah, well, good, good.' He pocketed the money. 'Now, see here,' he said, 'I know it's none of my business, but if I were you I'd see a doctor. You're looking ill, like those weirdoes who live around here. And these papers everywhere, on the floor, scattered. A fire risk. You should clean . . .'

I closed the door very slowly while he spoke and bolted it. I could hear the sound of him descending the stairs and the quiet throb of his car's engine as he drove away.

***

That night, as I sat in the bay window looking out over the rooftops, the maze of narrow streets and the boarded-up buildings, I spotted a gathering of night-walkers at the top of Ravel Street. There followed a sort of spectral procession by moonlight, along the street towards my building, past the rows of amputated trees. To my astonishment the crowd massed in front of my house, their pale and expressionless faces staring up at my window like smeared images in a bad photograph. There were hundreds of them.

I heard the front door being forced open and the sound of heavy footsteps as dozens of the nightwalkers stumbled up the stairs. Before they reached the attic I crossed the room and unbolted the door.

They staggered in like sleepwalkers and bore down on me, their white faces all around me, whispering incessantly. The woman from the flat opposite was there. She talked to me; half in English, half in the dead language, and finally I understood. . . .

***

We are all of us lost in the vast and endless night that is ourselves. We wander, hopelessly and eternally abandoned, through our own secret chambers of hell. Just as shadows are devoured by the night so our souls cry

out for their source. And all that then remains is the truth: there is nothing to understand; the words of the dead language cannot be deciphered and everything is bleak and icy and desolate, without meaning or final resolution . . .

Vrolyck

I had been living in a cramped apartment out in the suburbs to the south of the city. The apartment over-looked a dingy street, invariably strewn with rubbish due to the preponderance of fast food outlets. Amongst these was a café that remained open for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

The café was useful to me. After 1 a.m. it was usually deserted, and I often spent time there, sipping a greasy coffee and reading. My insomnia made sleep impossible most nights and the owners were uncommunicative foreigners who took no interest in their customers. The décor (moulded plastic seats and Formica tables) seemed not to have changed since the 1970s. Overhead, neon strip lighting gave the place a gleaming white sanitary air, like a hospital canteen.

One night, as I sat in the café drinking a lukewarm coffee in my usual corner, a woman in her early thirties, wearing a fur-trimmed black coat, came over to my table.

'May I join you?' she asked. 'It's okay if you'd prefer to be alone.'

My first reaction was one of alarm; I was surprised that she should take it upon herself to invade my privacy. But her manner was apologetic and inoffensive and I had no wish to cause a scene by being rude.

She bought me another coffee. I had been sipping at the dregs of the last one for the past half hour. The woman told me that her name was Emily Curtis.

'Excuse my curiosity,' she said, 'but you look very tired. Do you suffer from insomnia too?'

We had a conversation about sleepless nights and the various forms of medication prescribed to alleviate the condition. She had tried many of the same drugs as I, and had similarly found that the side effects had led her to abandon their use:

'Did you try the latest,' she asked, 'the supposedly extremely powerful one that's just come on the market?'

'Triaxopol?' I asked. 'It worked for the first few weeks with me. But the stomach cramps became unbearable. The only way I could fend off the pain was with stimulants, which defeated the purpose of the soporific! In the end I found that I preferred to live with the exhaustion.'

‘I think my condition is hereditary,’ she said, ‘my mother suffers from the same problem. One or other of us is awake during the small hours. Still, we keep each other company.’

‘I live alone. I don’t find I have much in common with other people,’ I replied.

I learned that she and her mother lived on the north side of the city and that she had been visiting some friends in this quarter. She had come into the café in order to while away the hours until dawn. I suppose that I envied her ability to approach a stranger without betraying any self-consciousness, for my own temperament is acutely solitary.

After half an hour or so, she asked me about the ‘white make-up’ that entirely covered my face and hands. I suppose that the question was inevitable and I was surprised that it had taken her so long to broach the subject.

‘Please excuse my saying so,’ she said, ‘but it gives you a ghoulish appearance. I thought that you might wear the make-up deliberately, like some Goths do, to appear morbid.’

‘Hardly,’ I replied. ‘I don’t have a choice. It masks the worst signs of chronic psoriasis. It’s one of the crosses I bear along with insomnia. I’m told that it’s psychosomatic and was brought on by the stress of an accident I suffered recently.’

‘You’re really in a pretty bad way, aren’t you?’

‘Isn’t everyone?’

Although our conversation flowed naturally and I found her more congenial than anyone with whom I had spoken in many weeks, I soon began to resent the intrusion and was longing to return to my apartment.

The woman noticed the book that I had set aside in order to talk with her. It was a battered old copy of *The Noctuary of Time*, and she picked it up, turning the pages with curiosity.

‘I love this stuff,’ she said, ‘I have done for as long as I can remember. When I was, oh, around four years old I found a copy of *Struwwelpeter* amongst the books in the local library. The pictures started off my obsession with weird horror.’

‘And now that you’re older?’ I asked.

‘I read the European writers, the ones whose work deals with cruelty and pain: the likes of Hanns Heinz Ewers, Stefan Grabinski, and Leonid

Andreyev. Are you familiar with their fiction?'

'I am indeed.'

She laughed: 'I think my reading habits have contributed to my insomnia, you know. When I do sleep, some of the dreams I have are quite awful!'

'Mine too. But at least I can use them; I write.'

'Really? Have you had anything published?'

'Just a couple of slim books of weird tales. They weren't very successful, but they did bring me some little recognition amongst those who read such works. Just lately I haven't written a great deal. I've been trying to finish something that I began just after my accident.'

'What is it called?'

'The working title is 'The Dybbuk Pyramid'.'

'I'd love to read it,' she offered.

'I don't know. It needs more work, though I can't quite see what to do with it at the moment.'

'Perhaps I could make a few suggestions?'

I thought for a moment, then nodded my assent:

By now it was past four in the morning and I could no longer resist the urge to be alone. As I stood up and pulled on my black overcoat she thanked me for the conversation and told me that she would be back in the café in forty-eight hours time and hoped that we might talk again. I promised to bring along the manuscript of 'The Dybbuk Pyramid'.

The fact that she'd admitted suffering from literary-inspired nightmares fascinated me, and I resolved to keep the appointment.

***

Our next meeting was rather perfunctory. We only spoke for a short time, since she was somewhat inebriated, but I gave her the manuscript of my story and called for a taxi to take her home. We did, however, arrange another appointment at the café, and she insisted on giving me her telephone number. Before I put her in the taxi she squeezed my hand in an affectionate manner. I noticed with embarrassment that traces of my masking lotion were left behind on her fingers.

***

Our third meeting proved to be the most interesting to date as it revealed the degree to which my influence on her had grown.

She was in the café before I arrived, nursing a coffee and smoking the same brand of cigarettes that I myself bought. I noticed a certain change in her features; the naïve quality seemed to have been repressed and, in its place was an unusual expression, almost of dislocation, which I knew very well indeed. She had the copy of 'The Dybbuk Pyramid' laid out on the plastic-coated table before her.

I sat down and accepted the cigarette she offered. Without preamble, she uttered the following:

'This story is without doubt the strangest thing I've ever read. It is as if the text is a reflection of my own thoughts. No—that's wrong. It is as if my thoughts are only a reflection of the story. While I read I couldn't tear my eyes away from the page and I forgot all about the outside world. It seemed as if my mind was becoming a part of the text. It was horrible and irresistible at the same time. And the really bizarre thing is that, on the surface, it appeared only to be a confused jumble of disconnected words!'

'It's an experiment,' I told her, 'a new technique I'm trying to perfect.'

'It's kind of like Joyce's stream of consciousness or Burroughs' cut-ups?'

'Kind of,' I agreed warily. I suppose that the majority of writers would be pleased and flattered by such remarks. It was after all a sign that the story had had precisely the desired effect. However, personal satisfaction as a writer was no longer any use to me.

'What inspired you to write it?' she asked.

'I have some notes here that I made in an attempt to sort things out in my own mind, when it all began. They're very short. You're welcome to read them.'

I passed her a sheet of paper I had torn from my notebook:

'The Dybbuk Pyramid' is an attempt to delineate an utterly alien consciousness that comes into contact with this world and interacts with it. It is not the case that the creature is evil—such an

interpretation is solely of the human paradigm—but that its very existence is inimical to mankind.

The first draft attempted to present the tale from the viewpoint of the alien creature itself: its thought processes were to be markedly different from those of humans and naturally it would not do to utilise vocabulary common to the experience of mankind.

I soon realised that the first draft could not possibly succeed. It read as total gibberish. Ninety-nine percent of the experiences of an alien entity would have no meaning for us. Even had the tale been confined to a simple encounter with the human race, the tremendous distortion in narrative technique meant that it would most resemble the aimless scrawling produced by some schizophrenics.

Then I realised that it might be possible to write such a tale in a first person narrative, were the alien consciousness fused with that of a man or woman, perhaps as a prelude to an invasion by outside forces. Thereby the alien aspect might be filtered through human perception, giving the narrative a cohesion and familiarity that would enable it to be communicable to its human readership.

Curtis had finished reading and seemed to be considering what I'd written. During her silence I lit one of my own cigarettes, offered her one, and watched the smoke curling up towards the neon light strips on the ceiling.

'You succeeded,' she said finally. 'The story's like an incantation. There's some mysterious power in it that words can't explain. Perhaps the closest analogy I can make is that one feels as if everything human is a sham: a façade for something else entirely. And what lies behind the façade cannot be understood.'

I nodded and flicked ash into the saucer of my coffee cup.

'You're as close as anyone can get to the truth,' I said.

The word 'contamination' rose unbidden in my mind. I stubbed out my cigarette in the saucer, drank the last dregs of my coffee, and told her that it was late and I really must go. 'I am a person,' I said, 'who requires separation from other people.' I had found that too much contact with them invariably disturbed the state of withdrawal that allowed me to function. Also, I knew that my work here was practically done.

She smiled, as if she understood my dilemma, and then put one of her gloved hands over my own, stroking it with her fingertips.

'One thing I've not mentioned,' she said, 'is the sense of isolation that comes across in the story. It's as if the author is utterly at a loss in this world, utterly alone. Perhaps it's a cry for help?'

I removed my hand from beneath hers, stood up with finality and thanked her. Wrapping myself in my heavy winter overcoat, I made my way toward the door. There was no need for us to meet again, unless further personal intervention was required to accelerate the process.

***

The walk back to my apartment was only a matter of minutes. I invariably found pleasure in the sight of the deserted streets at this time of night. During the day the main thoroughfare was busy with traffic and pedestrians, but after midnight it had an air of pleasing desolation.

I let myself into the nondescript block and made my way up the stairs towards my rooms. As far as I knew there were only three other tenants, and this suited me very well, for at night the whole place was deathly quiet.

Once inside, I sat down in the armchair adjacent to the window. The familiarity of my surroundings allowed me to relax after the encounter with Emily Curtis. I looked across the room at the low bookcase filled with the three-dozen or so battered books that I had read and re-read. I knew the volumes by heart, from the blemishes and tears on the dust-wrappers through to the dark horror of their contents. I had used them as exemplars in perfecting my method.

From the armchair I reached across to the window and opened the curtains so that I could gaze up at the stars. As usual, I felt the delicious sensation of falling upwards in a rush of cosmic vertigo, as if the sky were below me rather than above. I opened the window and leant out for a clearer view. For some time I allowed the pleasurable nausea to overwhelm me, but finally I had to return my gaze to the street. I was afraid that I might overbalance and plummet to the pavement below, as had happened to me once before.

There, beneath a streetlamp, I saw the pale face of Emily Curtis, watching me with a concentrated stare. I drew the curtains against the sight,

and when I opened them again half an hour later she had gone.

***

I managed to sleep for a few hours. Later that morning, after I'd bathed and applied the masking lotion to my skin, the phone rang. It was Emily. I cradled the receiver between my shoulder and ear and listened, lighting a cigarette, as she apologised for her intrusion.

'Vrolyk, I can't shake off the effects of that story,' she explained. 'It keeps racing through my mind, day and night. The thing's become a part of me. Whatever I do I can't stop thinking of it. Even as I'm speaking to you now I see the words on the pages.'

'Ah,' I said, between puffs on my cigarette.

'I have to see you. We have to talk about this. It's not right. I'm worried that I'm losing my . . .'

'I would prefer not to discuss the story any further,' I cut in. 'Just now I require total isolation.'

'For how long?' she asked desperately.

'For an indefinite period.'

As I put the receiver down, I recalled that she not only knew my telephone number but where I lived. I hoped that she would heed my request to stay away. It was imperative that I discover whether or not my own physical presence was a factor in any developments.

***

Weeks passed and I settled back into my nightly routine of haunting the café opposite and watching the stars whirl above me from the window. What had happened to Emily Curtis had been, I feared, merely an isolated incident, a consequence of brief exposure that would fade without any permanent effects. Such incidents had occurred before and had been a grave disappointment to me. All my previous contacts had been with subjects of little imagination, and although a few had suffered weird and horrible dreams after reading 'The Dybbuk Pyramid', the effects were not long-lasting. I wondered whether, if I rendered it into plainer English, permanent contamination would be achievable.

I had no great interest in the fate of Emily Curtis at this point, despite the fact that one of my correspondents, who also lived in the city, wrote to tell me that he had encountered her on the streets. This was possibly on the same night that I had spotted her looking up at my window. Apparently, she had been wandering as if in a daze, and when he approached her she had fled in terror. She seemed not to have recognised him although they had met on several occasions since our meeting to discuss my published short story collections.

Two weeks later, I received a manuscript posted to me by Emily Curtis. It appeared that she had written a tale of her own, which she had called 'The Communication'. There was an accompanying letter. One glance was enough to confirm that the contamination was a progressive rather than temporary condition. It was a very short letter and the salient portion ran as follows:

> *I am in a confused state of mind. I quite forget my own name, or even where I am for much of the time. I watch the shadows from the window during the day as they creep towards me. And I watch the men who work by night. The enclosed story, which I began a week ago, belongs to you. I may not have time to finish it. Before what I have been is lost for good, best that you should see it.*

It was as I expected: the manuscript appeared incomprehensible. Written on foolscap, it consisted of seemingly random words. These were not written in horizontal lines, but at varying angles to one another, in spirals and around the edges of the paper. Some of the words were in English, others in various other languages and a number were *outré* characters that would have been mere gibberish to anyone but myself. Those portions that were in English I have quoted below, having first arranged them in a linear fashion and incorporated translation where required. They mirror almost exactly my own story 'The Dybbuk Pyramid'.

> *In the dream she had found herself in a strange and unknown city. Her body was unfamiliar to her and appeared be that of an almost hairless biped covered by dark fabrics. This body was a source of repulsion; being an upright mass of tissue filled with water, fæces and*

mucus. Its senses were overwhelming; disparate but consecutive images of vivid colour and puzzling airborne perceptions seemed to enter through holes in its head, vibrations that made no sense entered through other holes on each side and pressures that varied with a maddening intensity rippled across the biped's outer layer. As this creature stumbled across the deserted and dark city of monoliths and past black vertical columns that fanned out into rustling limbs, it sucked air into itself repeatedly, with a horrible sense of uneven rhythm. The dream did not seem to last very long and was terminated when the creature came across another of its kind. Seeing this other and knowing that this was the form in which she also was trapped, Curtis found the horror too much to bear. The creature staggered towards her, clad in similar fabrics, but these did not hide the monstrosity of its awful face, like that of some deranged white ape. When it made an expression that was utterly alien, she fled, to be awoken by her own screams, fully clothed on the bed in the apartment she shared with her elderly mother. Whether it was the dream itself that had awakened her, or the memory of the dream whilst in a state of semi-consciousness, she could not tell.

I realised that what had been set in motion now required my own intervention: it was time that Emily met with an accident of her own. Doubtless she would do so anyway, in due course, but such had been the corruption of my own physical form in the interim that in order for me to gauge the success of my plan my timetable had to be brought forward. My psoriasis had worsened into something more akin to leprosy, and I was unsure how long my health would hold out.

***

The journey on the bus to Curtis's part of the city took just under an hour. Apart from the driver and myself the bus was empty. One of the small windows that provided ventilation was jammed open and freezing air blew into the deck. I had telephoned ahead and Curtis' mother had answered.

'Hello?' she had sounded strained and tense.

‘Mrs Curtis? This is Trefusis Vrolyck. I’m a friend of your daughter. Excuse my calling, but I understand she’s ill and I’m concerned about her.’

‘Oh Mr Vrolyck, thank you for calling. Emily’s mentioned you to me several times.’

‘How is she?’

‘The doctor thinks it’s a nervous breakdown. She’s not left her bed for days. She doesn’t speak or eat, only lies there, staring.’

‘Perhaps I could see her? It might help.’

‘Oh yes please. I’m at my wit’s end. She often told me how much she admired you and unless her condition changes the doctor says she’ll have to be taken into some horrible psychiatric unit. I couldn’t bear that to happen.’

‘I can be there in an hour or so. Would that be convenient?’

‘Oh yes, it’d be wonderful. Thank you so much Mr Vrolyck.’

‘I’ll see you shortly, then.’

And so I alighted onto the pavement next to a very busy dual carriageway flanked by 1950s council estates. The buildings were blocks seven floors high, each of identical plain grey concrete with flat roofs and exterior walkways. The Curtis apartment was situated in one of the blocks on the eastern edge.

All of the walls were covered with graffiti, most of it simply the names of those who had turned their spray cans upon them, but there were some symbols indicating an origin that was familiar to me. These were the symbols that I had attempted to communicate in English via ‘The Dybbuk Pyramid’.

I had to climb a vandalised stairway to reach the second floor. On the way up I passed a vagrant who seemed to be lost in some private ritual of his own. He was muttering to himself and arranging the rubbish strewn on the stairs into a little pile. He eyed me curiously as I passed and there was something in his expression that made me hesitate. On closer inspection, he seemed unused to the flesh and muscles that covered his skull and continually screwed his face up in a contorted manner as if unsure of the appropriate impression it should convey to others. I had myself experienced such a dilemma after my accident.

When I reached the Curtis apartment I had to ring the bell several times before I heard shuffling footsteps. The door was opened a few inches, though held by a safety chain. An old woman peered out at me.

‘Mr Vrolyck?’ she asked.

Initially I thought that she was perturbed by my appearance, for in truth, the masking lotion I employed no longer disguised the ravages time had wrought upon my skin. However, it was obvious that her eyesight was not keen and she was simply squinting at me myopically, too vain or stupid to wear spectacles.

‘That’s right. You must be Emily’s mother.’

‘Yes. Oh please come inside, won’t you?’ the woman said.

She unchained the door and beckoned me to follow her as she shuffled back down the hallway in her carpet slippers. She said:

‘I’ve just had a telephone call from Dr Phelps telling me that he felt I really should sign the papers. You know, the ones authorising him to arrange for Emily to be taken into care? It’s all so distressing.’

‘I can imagine that it must be terrible for you. But I think you’re wise to try every option before agreeing to that course of action,’ I replied.

‘Do you know what I think caused all this?’ she asked.

‘Please tell me.’

‘It’s the vandals on this estate. They’re all into drugs, you know. For some reason she took an interest in their graffiti and they took advantage of her.’

‘Really?’

‘Some of the neighbours told me that she’d paid them to spray-paint her own designs on the walls. But why should she do that? I don’t believe them. They’re gossips. Nasty people. And since those vandals were found dead; you’ll have read about it in the papers; they’ve been spreading the rumour that my Emily was somehow to blame!’

‘How so?’

‘I’ve no idea. Everyone knows they killed themselves. It was probably the drugs, and my daughter’s never taken drugs. Can you believe what they’re saying? My daughter! Can you believe it Mr Vrolyck?’

‘It’s ridiculous, of course . . .’

‘Of course it is. And anyway, I saw a gang of them just the other night spraying the walls again, the same ones that Emily used to meet. So how do they explain that, eh? I think newspapers make these stories up.’

‘That’s probably the answer.’

‘It’s an absolute disgrace . . .’

‘I understand how you feel.’

We stood outside Emily’s room. Her mother opened the door and, although it was dark within and the curtains were drawn, I could just make out a figure in the bed propped up with several pillows.

As I drew closer I could see that Emily Curtis’s face was blank and her eyes stared straight ahead without blinking. But I thought I detected a flicker of movement as I came into her view.

‘Do you think that I could be alone with her for a short while?’ I asked her mother.

‘Oh yes. I’ll make us some tea and bring it in. You sit down next to her.’

Left alone with Emily I sat down on the edge of the bed. I softly spoke her name and her eyes rotated in the direction of my voice and a vague, unnatural smile distorted her previously placid features. There were two forces at war within her brain, and the pressure upon it could only be relieved when one of them gained control.

The sound of her mother making tea filtered along the hallway. I heard cups clinking and a kettle being filled. I would not have long. Removing one of the pillows from beneath Emily’s head, I gripped it tightly in both hands and pressed it down over her face as hard as I could. There was a gurgling, and then her body thrashed around for what seemed a long time. Finally she slumped back and I took the pillow away from her face. Her mouth was open and her eyes wide with death. Gently, I closed them and turned her head to one side. I replaced the pillow in its original position, making it look as if she were asleep.

A few seconds later the mother entered bearing a tray. Before she could find anywhere to set it down I motioned that we should leave the room.

‘Was there any response?’ she asked in a hushed voice as we walked back down the hall.

‘I think so, yes. She seemed to recognise my voice before she drifted off to sleep. She even smiled.’

The mother poured out the tea in the kitchen and I sat and sipped the weak liquid, explaining that it would be wise if we let Emily rest. I suggested that perhaps the response I had witnessed might be the first sign of a pleasing amelioration in her condition.

When I left there were tears of gratitude in the eyes of the old woman.

‘Perhaps you could come again soon?’

But I pretended not to hear.

***

As I made my way back down the vandalised stairway the vagrant was still there. He had been busy in my absence and had completed the arrangement he was fashioning from crumpled wrappers, ash and cigarette butts. It looked like a rubbish heap, but on examining it more closely I could see that it had been fashioned into a crudely-shaped pyramid. His face was still struggling with its expressions, and from time to time one of his grimy hands traced a path along the graffiti upon the walls. But it was when he spoke that I knew the contamination had not been confined to my own contacts. For the tramp, with his pale dead face, mouthed the words:

'It is the time of the black radiance from the stars.'

Although the words were English, it was in my own language that I received his telepathic transmissions.

It was brilliant. The city was covered with such graffiti, the symbols reproducing like bacteria. How much more effective than my own attempts to disseminate them under the guise of my writing! As you may have guessed, the symbols were a sign, a sort of cosmic homing-beacon, calling down others of my kind to enter the bodies of human beings. And I thought how ironic it was that, after all my efforts, it was vandals, those self-styled popular artists contaminated by Curtis, who had proved the more effective communicators.

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My last sight of Emily Curtis was in the café where we first met.

Some days after the incident I have just described, I was out on the streets, seeking further signs of the contamination. There was indeed ample evidence of its unchecked spread. The symbols had been plastered on bridges, railway carriages, buses and any wall that would show them clearly. I am not sure that the people were particularly aware, except for Curtis, the unknown vagrant, the vandals and, of course, myself. I had been one of the very first, the pathfinder, so to speak. There were twelve billion of us waiting out there, so only around half our number would be able to

find shelter in the human race on this planet. In order for a successful transfer to take place, all human thoughts had to be extinguished from the individual for a long enough period to allow our own to take hold, so the prior death of the brain was entirely necessary.

Emily Curtis was sitting in the window, gazing out through the misty, condensation-soaked glass of the café at nothing in particular. Her skin was even paler than it had been in life and was caked in the same white foundation that I wore. As I passed by, her eyes met mine for a brief moment. There lurked within them a black radiance, filtered from the stars.

She knew now, as did I, that we are here only temporarily, until these physical shells rotted away. Then we would have to move on again, fleeing the death that pursued us. But for now, like me, she was trapped within the human carcass, suffering the horrifying existence of the biped simian, the maddening trace-memories lingering within the fabric of their brains: a dead person's memories, names drawn in the sand just beyond the reach of the waves breaking from the black ocean before it.

The Search for Kruptos

The man who writes these lines bears only an infinitesimal resemblance to the bespectacled student of the waking world who left Dublin æons ago clad in his father's three-piece suit. That memory is now my only link to the past. Many individuals take refuge in a foreign country but what of those who depart for the exile of dreams? Was I really the 'dangerous' atheist who, forsaking the Judaism of his immediate ancestors and the Roman Catholicism of his adopted country, had turned to the world of the secular imagination? I studied metaphysics at Trinity and it was in the library there that I must have first stumbled across some reference to the writings of Thomas Ariel while I half-dozed over its ancient and mouldy volumes. It seems obvious to me now that whatever glimpses I have obtained into the life and works of Ariel have occurred at points where, as Poe claimed, 'the confines of the waking world blend with the world of dreams.'

Ariel was the author of a number of provocative works published during the first half of the nineteenth century. His ontological speculations were akin to the wildest phantasies of Poe and De Quincey. His fundamental belief was that the mechanism of dreaming was a function with limitless possibilities. When he attempted the private publication of his short treatise, *The Mysteries of Dreaming*, the printers refused to handle it. Details of its contents were passed to the authorities and a warrant was issued for Ariel's arrest. He fled England in 1824. There followed a quiet campaign of book burning and the eradication of his name from most bibliographic records. *Blackwoods*, *The Quarterly* and like publications henceforth returned his letters and accompanying manuscripts unopened. But I managed to accumulate a small number of documents, articles etc. by Ariel and also a charred daguerreotype taken in northern Germany during his long exile with the date '1842' scratched into the back. It depicted the head of a balding, clean-shaven man in his fifties with traces of whitening hair around the temples. His expansive face was haunted by shadows. His eyes were set deep in the sockets and in their expression there seemed to lurk a suggestion of world-weary nihilism. A black neckerchief was wrapped around his throat. The overall effect was quite funereal.

Records of Ariel during his exile in Europe are extremely sketchy. One or two sources gave credence to the rumour that he had, in 1879, at the grand old age of eighty-nine, turned up unexpectedly in the cathedral city of Basel, paying a call on a prominent professor of classical philology. After this there is silence—for Ariel seemed determined to die in as northern a latitude as he could, apparently intent on feasting his dying eyes on the *aurora borealis* while filling his lungs with opium-smoke.

Perhaps, mentally, he had not travelled far from those early days when De Quincey had praised his work, hiding discreetly behind his pseudonym X.Y.Z. in *The London Magazine*:

> *I go on, therefore, to commend the work of Mr A—. Though not of a moral nature, one might say of his points of genius, like one of the twelve Caesars,* Ut puto, Deus fio. *Marvellously, indeed, has this author succeeded in revealing tantalising glimpses of those hoary volumes which rest in chambers outside the scope of present human knowledge, until now known only to the moonstruck and the opium-eater. No man is better qualified to explore those obtuse speculations of a metaphysical cast which redeem the excesses of the rationalists. His proposed work* Kruptos *bids fair to be a most notable production.*

It was the manuscript of *Kruptos* which I sought above all else. Ariel had started work on it before his enforced flight from England and in all probability carried it with him across Europe throughout his exile. It was to be the *magnum opus* which would secure his reputation. But it seemed that he never finished it and I came to believe that he took the uncompleted manuscript with him, in 1880, when he travelled northwards towards his strange, planned death within the Arctic circle.

I intended to follow in his footsteps and I had traced his movements to his final resting place at the town of Karnswilloch. It is a place not to be found on any map (a place that seems to have appeared from the snow and the ice and disappeared again after Ariel's arrival), but I knew it to be located somewhere in the Varanger Peninsula.

And so, in 1940, at a time when the Nazis occupied virtually the whole of Europe, I undertook a foolhardy journey to Karnswilloch in the northern

corner of the continent. I travelled with documents proving my neutral Irish nationality and which obscured my racial origins.

But first I visited Paris, its boulevards ablaze with flags bearing the swastika, to consult manuscripts in the Bibliotheque Nationale which had not been handled for fifty years. I made the final preparations for the journey north in a dusty garret situated on the Rue Duval in the Montmartre district. I stuffed my suitcases with books and manuscripts, with snow-boots, scarves, mittens and a huge seal-skin coat.

It required a considerable bribe to secure a seat and berth on one of the Etoile du Nord Pullman trains bound for Hamburg. I saw blasted fields and towns as we passed through France, Belgium and the Netherlands.

When the train reached the German frontier a group of S.S. officers boarded and filed through the carriages, apparently in search of some quarry. One of them looked very closely at my papers and then stared at me directly for a minute or so. I could not look him in the eye and explained in faltering German that I was a student on my way to Finland to pursue academic research. Sweat was dribbling down my forehead and temples and my hands shook uncontrollably as I tried to light a cigarette. The officer walked over to one of his companions and pointed back at me. They both smiled unpleasantly and leafed through my documents, holding them up to one of the light bulbs in the carriage ceiling before finally passing them back to me as if they were distasteful.

The train was soon rumbling northwards into Germany itself.

I had to change at Hamburg and wandered around that grey, miserable port for an hour or so. I saw Jews being attacked and carried off in the streets. The Star of David was scrawled in blood-red paint on boarded shop windows and doors. The spectacle sickened me more than it is possible to imagine. A hurricane of bigotry was sweeping across Germany and into the rest of Europe tearing at the souls of men.

We passed through Denmark into Sweden and the landscape became increasingly bleached. The train I boarded at Malmo steamed across plains of snow, through Stockholm, Sundsvall and Vannas. Looking out of the carriage window I saw the frozen Gulf of Bothnia in the distance; a vast and level vista of pack ice stretching as far east as the eye could see.

The heating inside the carriage was not sufficient to ward off the deep chill of the freezing air without and I wrapped myself in the seal-skin coat

and scarf. I began to leaf through my documents in order to keep my mind from dwelling on the grim landscape and the sharp grip of the cold.

One item in particular drew my attention; an old Scandinavian travelogue which I had found in Paris and had not previously had the opportunity to examine. It included an account by the English author George Burgess of a chance meeting with Thomas Ariel in a tavern as the latter was making his way northwards towards Karnswilloch:

Shortly after my narrow escape from the clutches of a black menace in Råbäck I found myself drowning the memory of the incident at a certain tavern in Jokkmokk. There was an awful blizzard raging outside and it contrasted sharply with the fire before which I sat, drinking hot grog and thanking Providence. I must have downed my third or fourth tankard when the door flew open, admitting a great breath of freezing wind and snow and a well-wrapped figure in a dark cloak and hat carrying a thick volume. For a moment my heart thumped in my chest and the colour must have drained from my face—I thought perhaps that I had not left the horror of Råbäck behind. But then the stranger removed his hat, scarf and cloak and surveyed the room about him.

I saw the face of an extremely elderly man. It was deeply lined and weather-beaten with an aspect like that of crumpled leather. His sunken eyes were half-covered by drooping lids, the eyes of a man who had peered long and hard into infinities. The pupils were bottomless. He was completely bald. His gaze fastened on my own and he moved across the room like a hawk swooping towards me. He flung his garments at the innkeeper and introduced himself. He was no less a personage than Thomas Ariel, the notorious metaphysician and author, whose name has been elevated to whispered legend. He put the thick volume, bound in leather, on the table between us.

His conversation was made remarkable by the breadth and novelty of his metaphysical speculations. It was as if he had wandered into the tavern from beyond the gates of oblivion. His voice had a certain hollow, tomb-like quality and the matters of which he spoke were shot through with infinite splendour and vision. He made me believe that he

was no longer entirely of this world but had become an ambassador from some twilight quarter where dreams are unceasing.

At the time I was enraptured. But once he had departed I seemed unable to contain the memory of his revelations in my brain. They seemed too vast for its scope. Nevertheless the brief encounter opened up an incredible vista in my mind which has, since then, been continually haunted by shades of fantastic mystery. Yet, I feel sure that his mystical pilgrimage ever northwards, into the lost plains of ice and tundra, was one that no mortal man could possibly survive. And surely that book, Kruptos*, which had been between us the whole time, was no longer for the understanding of men.*

I put down the curious travelogue and lit a cigarette. The smoke felt bitter and cold in my throat and lungs. I scraped the ice from the carriage window and watched the landscape of fjords passing by. It was unchanging: endless snow and tundra and the sea of ice to the east. The locomotive ploughed on through Boden, Kiruna and then across Torne Lappmark to the Finnmarks-vidda and beyond.

I must have dozed for a while and was awakened by the train drawing to a halt with a shudder and a huge burst of steam. I gathered up my belongings, hauled them through the corridor and lowered them onto the deserted platform. Snow was falling heavily and the cold was unbearable.

I looked around for signs of life. No-one else had disembarked from the train and so I walked along its length to the engine at the front in search of the driver. His cabin was deserted. The place name on the station platform had long ceased to be readable. This was the end of the line.

I hauled my trunk and bags onto a track outside the station. Within an hour or so, at the rate the snow was now falling, the railway line would be impassable. Indeed, the line, the station, everything would be buried. I had stood for several minutes, stamping my feet and trying to encourage my circulation, when I heard something coming along the track towards me. It was a peasant with a reindeer and a small trap. He had evidently been trying to collect firewood. I stepped into his path and shouted ‘Hallo!’ while waving my arms. He drew on the reindeer’s reins. One could almost believe that it was merely a great heap of furs guiding the trap. Even the peasant’s eyes were hidden behind thick goggles. He climbed down and helped me

put my belongings into the trap, on top of the small pile of firewood, and then we got up to the seat behind the reindeer. The peasant appeared to speak no English and did not comprehend any of my attempts to communicate with him in various Scandinavian tongues. In the end I simply pointed along the track, which ran parallel with the railway line and extended beyond it. With a shake of the reins we moved northwards into the near blizzard.

We travelled for hours and I often thought how miraculous it was that the snowstorm had not forced us to stop. At last, though, the storm subsided and a great casement of deep blue sky opened out ahead of us. Then we were bathed in a spectacular sunset, seemingly frozen in space and time; ghosts at the edge of the universe.

We came to a plain of ice that mirrored the sky above and I saw Karnswilloch in the distance. It was built on five hills in the shape of a cross. The central and tallest hill bore a crumbling tower which dominated the cluster of rooftops around it. Swathes of icy fog curled around the ruined steeples, domes and chimney stacks. The town was snowed-in and its half-buried streets wound about the hills in labyrinthine fashion, through abandoned courtyards and squares and silent passage-ways.

Then, suddenly, the *aurora borealis* appeared in the sky. The shower of multicoloured light towered and flamed gorgeously above our heads.

We drew close to the town and passed through a titanic arch with four pillars. I saw narrow and inter-twining streets and bridges suspended over frozen canals. The spires and domes were of extreme antiquity, their interiors gutted and dark and choked with tattered volumes.

I have never seen so many books. They were everywhere: on icy streets, floors, in doorways, blocking windows. And at times I saw ghostly forms, like images from faded photographs, endlessly searching through the volumes as we travelled through the decrepit chaos, ascending and descending past ruined façades of dead buildings. There were tiers of sagging or collapsed roofs above and below us and endless mazes of hollowed steps leading up to railed streets. The houses tottered, their garrets shedding books from high windows like autumn leaves scattered by the wind.

We were spectral in the snow and fog, moving slowly through the strange bibliopolis, the trap climbing steadily upwards towards the great

central hill. Now and then I lost sight of the crumbling tower we had seen from the distance. Finally we came out into a large, central square, rolling across a profusion of torn books and pages.

The wind was of terrific force and hurled papers and snow across the open space. It was difficult to remain upright. We watched the fog curling around the rooftops and spires below us.

The tower was situated on a plateau bounded by a lofty bank some twelve feet above the level of the square. Crumbling steps, cleared by the wind of snow, led up to this higher ground. My companion helped unload my trunk and other belongings. We had not exchanged a single word since we had left the station and I had not seen his face. He stuck out his fur-gloved, shapeless hand and I clasped it in both of mine.

I was surely lost in a dream. The journey across countries had seemed to last for centuries, and I had finally arrived in a fantastic region. The war-torn Europe I had left behind seemed as distant as the far side of the moon. The secrets that I hoped to uncover would live down the centuries whereas Hitler would rank with Genghis Khan as merely a historical curiosity. I sought concepts of a magnitude as yet unplumbed, beyond immortality, infinitely more significant than any previous philosophy.

I stood alone on the windswept square. The peasant and his reindeer departed and I watched the trap disappear silently, swallowed up by the white fog.

Before me stood the tower fashioned from crumbling brick with several lozenge-shaped windows around its circumference. I climbed the hollowed steps which led to the plateau where the tower stood, up through the bank, and then across the level surface to its entrance. I passed through an ornate doorway with an unlocked portal into the interior. It was difficult to gain entrance because a pile of rotten books half-blocked the way. Indeed, the whole interior was clogged with discarded volumes. The tower seemed to be a series of libraries, stuffed and overflowing with tomes, one on top of another. There was a partly ruined spiral staircase which wound through the floors but even this was made nearly impassable by masses of books thrown down from the floors above.

I climbed upwards as best I could, determined to reach the top, but stumbling over the carcasses of hundreds of volumes. The very walls and floors of the upper chambers seemed composed of the spines of books.

Outside, through the windows, I could see the full scope of the town. It was otherworldly, lit by the subtle hues of the northern lights.

In the highest chamber of the tower was an arched and narrow doorway. In the room beyond, boxed in by volumes in various states of decay, was an unmistakable figure. He was dressed in a black frock coat and stiff collar with neckerchief. On the table in front of him stood a single candle. He was leaning over and writing furiously with a quill. His bald head and face were deeply etched with a thousand lines. The flickering illumination touched his visage as he turned to regard me. His eyes bored straight into my soul from beneath heavy lids. What incalculable knowledge shone in them! Their pupils were unnaturally large and black; they had no beginning or end but were like twin abysses, illimitable gateways to the secrets of time and space.

I moved closer and Ariel put down his quill. Inside this unbelievably aged human form—now little more than a shell—was an inexhaustible presence. Ariel had transcended human thought and knowledge altogether, had become a living enigma unbounded by the human paradigm, an avatar of ultimate mystery. It was like standing before all the stars and oceans. I attempted to speak to him but there was simply no means of communication open to me. Language was utterly useless. It was as futile to address him as to address the universe itself.

And yet he arose and walked slowly across the chamber, drawing a battered old leather volume from amongst a dozen others in a pile and handing it to me.

It was the book for which I had sought so long. At last, it was *Kruptos*.

As I turned away with the book in my grasp I looked over my shoulder and imagined I saw a curious expression on the face of the ancient metaphysician. I had seen something like it before in the suggestion of nihilism in his 1842 daguerreotype. But now there was something else mingled with it. Something damnably close to irony.

I made my way down the choked staircase and out of the tower, hauling my trunk and belongings with me. Across the square was a gaunt house which looked less desolate than the rest and I forced the door open. Here I could study the book in full and unravel its innermost secrets for myself.

The gaunt old house faced the central tower and I could see it through a long and narrow bay window which reached to the top of the room’s lofty

ceiling. This building, like all the others, was overflowing with discarded tomes and I had to clear many of them so as to make a space for my belongings. The cellar was piled with wood and I soon had a ferocious blaze crackling in the fireplace.

I could barely control my desire to read *Kruptos*. I did everything else in a daze. Finally I sat on a heap of books by the fire and worked my way through the first few pages.

It was a mighty volume, over two thousand pages long, and I studied it carefully during the following days. I paused only to eat the food packed amongst my belongings and to lapse into exhausted slumbers.

On and on I read in that lost and fabulous town haunted by the endless twilight and the *aurora borealis*.

The conjectures and speculations in *Kruptos* indeed exceeded all previous metaphysics and philosophy. The arguments were constructed with the grandeur of some titanic gothic cathedral, argument by argument, the text ascending higher and higher like a celestial steeple, and progressed beyond the limits of my understanding. It would take many centuries to comprehend the concepts in full and to follow the final chapters into their upper reaches, but from what I understood of the first two or three hundred pages, *Kruptos* would revolutionise the minds of men forever.

At last my brain felt as if it were bursting with tremendous thoughts and ideas and I was forced to put the book aside. As I sat there smoking, my mind, seeking relief from the profound abstractions which had occupied it, began to contemplate questions which, until then, I had not fully considered.

What was Karnswilloch? Who were those elusive beings in their hats and greatcoats searching endlessly amongst the ruins? The town seemed to stand on the borderland between dream and waking consciousness. It existed and yet did not exist.

Another thought occurred to me. What were the innumerable volumes which lay scattered in the snows and the hollow buildings?

I picked a book at random from amongst the multitudes and turned it over to look at the title on the flyleaf. It read:

Kruptos, vol CLVII

I picked up another at random:

Kruptos, vol MCMIV

And another:

Kruptos, vol MMXIII

I looked at the covers of two dozen more. They were all so numbered.

Then I must have lost my mind, plunging outside into the snow and shouting up at the tower like a lunatic, while Ariel worked on indifferently and incessantly, his brain long since devoted to disentangling mysteries beyond all human comprehension.

I next remember staggering back to the house in a state of utter mental exhaustion, the books only intensifying my despair. Not all the contents of those thousands of volumes could fill the void within me. They were only doorways to further doorways without end.

And if I joined those other ghostly images in their eternal search, those beings exiled from the waking world, would I still be human or merely some pale, unworldly reflection of Ariel himself?

I sat in front of the fire, watching the flames writhe and surge up the chimney. Then a great gust of storm wind swept over the town and in its wake the flames reached out of the fireplace for me. I stumbled backwards, lost my footing on the piles of volumes and fell into a corner.

The burst of fire lashed at the innumerable *Kruptos* editions and the books went up in a flash. It spread across the room, hungrily consuming all in its path, sending blackened fragments and smoke towards the high ceiling. I came to my senses and smashed my way through the inferno to the outside.

I crawled through the snow with the flames at my back. They leapt from building to building, billowing smoke into the atmosphere.

Karnswilloch was being destroyed. Apocalypse had come to the region between dream and waking consciousness. There was a great rushing noise in my ears which blotted out everything else. I was in the very heart of the sun. The flames licked at my flesh. Light, only light existed. Ecstatic, unbearable light. And I thought of Ariel and of the ghostly exiles and I . . .

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Two German concentration camp guards looked at the dying form of the Irish Jew at their feet. There was still a spark of life left in him for he feebly crawled a little further away from them before finally coming to a halt.

One of the guards replaced his smoking Luger in its holster. He smiled at his companion.

'Did he really think he'd get to the fence and escape in broad daylight?'

'Hans, this one's crazy. He went mad on the train that brought him here. We've done him a service. At least he's escaped going into the gas chambers with the others.'

Hans Kohler nodded at Wolfgang Ewers. He bent down to the Jewish student with the four bullets lodged in his back who was attempting to mumble something with his dying breath.

Kohler was startled by the dying man's eyes. They were like those of an incredibly aged person, not of a young man at all. Then he noticed some papers sticking out of his pocket.

He looked at them. They were in English and he couldn't decipher them immediately so he tucked them away in his jacket. His grasp of the language was limited but he decided it might be amusing to translate them during a spare evening.

'Amazing. He must have smuggled in paper and a pencil. These Jews are crafty devils,' Kohler said.

Kohler stood up again and turned the corpse over with his boot so that it stared upwards.

Ewers too saw the expression in its eyes.

Black as Darkness

Jack Wells drained his second can of ice-cold beer and waved away a fat bluebottle that had drifted lazily across his line of vision. The heat was tremendous. He couldn't remember a summer like it, or at least not since '76, or maybe '47. Now, as then, the tarmac on the roads had turned sticky and the pavements were cracking. London was utterly still, exhausted by the hot air filling its streets. Only a few brave souls, and one or two mad dogs, dared to venture out.

He lived in an elegant house in Highgate, conveniently close to the Underground station. This impossibly hot August day he was sitting in his open front door looking down the two flights of steps that led to the pavement. He had opened all the doors and windows at dawn in the knowledge that the day would be even more uncomfortable than the sleepless night before. A few hours later he had watched as the postman staggered up the road with his heavy bag, weaving unsteadily from one house to the next, sweating and mouthing curses at the high front steps to the houses on Wells' side of the street.

This particular morning the postman brought a letter from Ben Gibbs. Ben was Jack's oldest friend, but Jack had taken the letter with uncertainty and did not open it immediately. The two of them had not been in contact now for well over two weeks, and for no good reason that Jack could understand Ben had holed himself up in his house at Hampstead Heath. The telephone was left unanswered, and on the couple of occasions when Jack had made the trip over to Ben's house in the maze of stairways and courtyards off The Mount he'd failed to raise him. On the last occasion Jack had spent an hour ringing the doorbell and standing outside. There had been something obscuring the view through the letterbox, and the internal shutters had been closed over the windows. Nevertheless, Jack was sure that Ben was at home.

Jack was hurt. When they had had disagreements in the past, it had always been him who had apologised and got them to talk things over. But this time he was not even aware that they had argued! Now, as he took the letter through into his study, which was as messy as usual, with cluttered bookshelves and mounds of papers, his gaze fell upon a framed black and

white photograph of the two of them. It had been taken in Paris in 1944, just after the city had been liberated from the Nazis. It showed two young men in officers' uniforms, caps tipped rakishly on the side of their heads, cigarettes poking out from the edges of grinning mouths. Ben wore a thick scarf as well as his jacket and Jack remembered that although it had been a warm day, Ben had complained, as always, about how cold he was.

Jack sat and stared at the envelope, fearful of its contents. Yes, they had fallen out from time to time, but they had only once seriously argued. It had been back there in Paris, in those heady days immediately after the liberation when they'd sown some wild oats in the brothels of the city. Even the naturally prudish Ben had been swept up in the euphoria of the moment. It had been harmless fun, but then they had met Verna Karndess. Of course, Karndess had been a stage name; she was really Miranda Hughes. In Jack's view visiting a few prostitutes was one thing, but Karndess, by god, was quite another. . . . Jack had been horrified when Ben announced his engagement to the actress.

It might seem strange that the unopened letter should lead his thoughts to Karndess and the events of over a half-century before, but it was rare that a day passed without him reflecting on what had happened between the three of them. It seemed that he would never be able to forget . . . his friendship with Ben was a constant reminder. . . .

***

Two weeks earlier, before the heat wave had struck, Ben Gibbs had found himself wandering near the Holloway Road. Ben remembered leaving his house in Hampstead, crossing the Heath via Parliament Hill and walking through the streets in Dartmouth Park. He walked with no particular object in view, except perhaps the discovery of some new and unfamiliar experience. He had a few empty hours to fill before visiting Jack.

Much of what he had seen was tawdry and mundane, and on the Hornsey Road he had stopped outside a video shop. The place was unremarkable, merely one store amongst many others on that most dismal stretch of shops and council estates. It was flanked by a kebab house and a convenience store, and above its grimy windows was an electrically lit sign

announcing ‘Videos for Hire Ltd’. Strips of red plastic hung in the doorway and fluttered in the breeze.

Ben did not know quite why he ventured inside. He had felt a little tired. Although in his seventies he was still fit and much more active than Jack, who’d grown fat in the last twenty years. He entered the dim interior of the shop and looked around.

At first he had problems reading the titles. The grimy window refused to admit much sunlight, and although the shop was lit by neon strip lights, half of them were not working. Ben didn’t much like the place. He stood back from the rows of video cases displayed on the cheap, self-assembly shelves which reached up to the low ceiling, making up his mind to leave. He couldn’t see anyone behind the serving hatch at the back of the shop, so a sudden departure would not look odd. Idly he read the notice above the hatch: ‘All films £1.50 per night. Films must be returned by 10 p.m. the next day’.

Perhaps he and Jack could watch a video that night? Usually Ben fell in with Jack’s suggestions, so it would make a change. He examined the titles once again, now that his eyes had adjusted to the twilit shop. It seemed that they specialised in horror and thriller movies, and although he had little interest in such material he decided that he might find something worth watching. As he worked his way along the videos a rather bored and distracted-looking young man appeared at the hatch. He had a shaven head and looked somewhat threatening to the older man. He stared at Ben quite aggressively as he lit a cigarette, but then became engrossed in opening a parcel of videos.

Ben took down one of the empty cases from the shelves. It was a film called *Curse of the Demon* starring Dana Andrews, whom he remembered from some other films he’d seen. He replaced it and took down another. This one seemed to be an even more trashy affair entitled *Children Shouldn’t Play with Dead Things*. Embarrassed to be even holding it, he hastily returned it to its place on the shelf.

He had lost his enthusiasm for renting a film, at least from this shop. Ben straightened himself up and turned towards the door. As he did so he heard the young man say, in a surprised tone: ‘Verna Karndess’. This stopped Ben dead in his tracks. The young man was turning a video over in his hands.

Unsure of whether he had heard the man correctly, Ben went cautiously up to the hatch. The young man looked up and grinned at him.

'Just arrived,' he said proudly. 'A bootleg copy of *Black as Darkness*. You won't know the film: it was never released. It's a bit like that Ealing film *Dead of Night*. Really obscure.'

'I've heard of it,' Ben said quietly.

'Really, really obscure this one,' the young man continued, not listening. 'It's got Verna Karndess in it. Y'know, like Theda Bara?'

'Yes, I know,' he nodded.

'How do you know?' he looked up, suspicious and unbelieving.

'I was married to Verna Karndess.'

***

Once back at his Hampstead flat Ben loaded the tape into his video player. The offer of £100 had overcome the young man's reluctance to sell the video, along with a promise that Ben would take it back and let him make a copy at some later date. Ben found himself hesitating before pushing the play button. He had never seen the film, not having attended the studio's private (and, as it transpired, only) viewing.

Verna had told him later that the viewing had been a fiasco. Most of the film stock was discovered to have serious defects, and these had caused unacceptable distortions in the final images. Nobody could account for the faults: at the editing stage the film had appeared flawless. The result was that the characters ended up looking like reflections in those funfair mirrors, stretched and contorted almost beyond recognition. And as if that wasn't bad enough, the sound quality was ruined by inexplicable noises on the soundtrack. In those days they didn't have the means to clean it up; it sounded as if a small crowd were whispering continuously in the background.

Almost immediately the screening began accusations started to fly and a fistfight broke out between the director and the producer. The former claimed that the film had been sabotaged: as well as the distortions, someone had removed whole scenes and replaced them with idiotic dream-sequences from god only knew where. These were close-ups of a mouth, whose opening and closing seemed to correspond remarkably with the

errant background whispering. The producer had been infuriated by the director's accusations—he blamed him for the film and was appalled at the avant-garde farrago that had resulted.

If someone had perpetrated a practical joke nobody was admitting to it, and no one had a satisfactory explanation of the events. The film seemed to have been cursed from the outset, and Verna was particularly appalled. She had regarded it as her opportunity to at last achieve the fame she desired so desperately. It had been designed originally as a portmanteau of ghost stories; she played the central character in the second tale, based on the story 'The Reunion' by the obscure Victorian authoress Lilith Blake.

The story of *Black as Darkness* has of course become a thing of movie folklore. 'The Reunion' concerned a ghostly murderess stalking the streets. Even before it went into production the screenwriter had problems with the adaptation of the Blake story, which he attempted to update, setting it in a rainy, pre-war Berlin ghetto. An Oxford Don, Muswell, had written to him begging him not to transpose the story onto film. The man had made the bizarre claim that Blake's work was not fiction at all but a series of cryptic incantations, whose dissemination could lead to disturbing consequences. He advised that using Blake's tale would result in the triumph of dark forces. Everyone at the studio had dismissed this as malicious nonsense, and it had been regarded as an unhappy coincidence that the screenwriter was found to have hanged himself only a few days after the adaptation had been delivered.

Poor Verna had been upset by the rumours surrounding the film, and had even formed the idea that there was some sort of conspiracy against her. She had always suffered from a certain amount of egocentric paranoia, even in the early days of their romance, when she had told Ben that her use of a stage name was designed to throw an old enemy off her track. But, despite her idiosyncrasies, Ben had fallen for her completely. They had been inseparable and had announced their engagement within weeks of meeting. He remembered that Jack had found their relationship amusing at first, especially as Ben was so young, only twenty, but his smile had faded once Ben broke the news of their forthcoming marriage. Verna and Jack had never really got on and Ben well knew that Jack had deep misgivings about her.

He still could not quite bring himself to play the tape. He sat staring at his television screen, wondering what it would feel like to see Verna once more. He had no photographs of her; he had destroyed them all one drunken night. He wondered if the bootleg tape would be the same as the distorted original film. Perhaps it had been restored, for with modern computer techniques he supposed anything was possible.

What would Verna think if she knew that she had achieved some sort of posthumous fame, albeit amongst a small number of film buffs? Did she know? It was possible that she was still alive.

As he sat in his chair in front of the blank television screen Ben thought of how Verna had failed to achieve her ambitions. In the 1940s, during the war and shortly afterwards, she had taken various supporting roles in provincial repertory theatres. Had it not been for her striking appearance he had secretly wondered if she would have been able to get any work at all. He could admit it now, after all this time—frankly she was an awful actress. The idea that she would have to work hard, that things would not simply fall into place for her, was outside her comprehension. And she sincerely believed that she had a god-given talent.

Still, there was no denying that she had been a remarkable-looking woman. Her figure was voluptuous and was emphasised whenever she wore the low-cut, full-length black dress she favoured. She sported ornate rings on six of her extraordinarily long fingers and there was invariably a pearl choker around her pale neck. He recalled with wonder her skin, unblemished, almost like porcelain, but then laughed when he remembered the velvet turban she often affected and which hid her curling black hair.

He wouldn't have laughed at her back then. There was a cruel sensuality in her face; the look of a woman who found life's usual pleasures barren. Her eyelids were fringed with thick, black lashes, which may or may not have been natural. Beneath them, like half-moons, were the most unimaginable crystal-blue eyes. They held one's gaze hypnotically. Ben remembered how cold Verna's fleshy lips had been when he kissed them, and how she had moved like a panther.

He pressed the play button and the screen went momentarily black. Then it flickered with white lines, the music began and the title came up:

Black as Darkness

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Jack Wells switched on the electric fan in his study and opened his shirt to let the turbulent air play over his bulging stomach. Putting on his reading glasses he turned the unopened envelope over in his fingers and then carefully slit it open along the top edge with a paperknife. The letter was dated the previous day.

Dear Jack,
You may be wondering what's happened to me. I know that I've been avoiding you, but something fantastic has happened. I've found a video of that film of Verna's.

I've been watching it ever since. She's told me everything.

I can't explain in a letter. I must see you. I'll come round at 2 o'clock tomorrow.

She's back.

Ben.

A trickle of sweat dribbled down Jack's forehead and into his left eye. He took off his glasses and wiped it away. Two bloated flies had landed on the letter and crawled across the handwriting. He brushed them away angrily, letting the letter fall onto the desk. Although he had guessed that it was bad news, he had not imagined it would be this. Was his old friend having some kind of nervous breakdown? Was it possible that he had found out what had happened? Jack sat down, the heat of the day for once forgotten.

From the moment Jack Wells had first met her he had developed a deep loathing for Verna Karndess, but he could not have imagined then that she would still be the cause of such trouble over fifty years later. How on earth had Ben found a copy of that film? He had idolised the woman, and seemed to have believed that she had talent. The wretched woman had insisted that she had given her greatest performance in *Black as Darkness*, but at least Ben would now see that she had never been able to act. She had claimed that everyone on the set had congratulated her, and Ben had insisted after visiting one of the shoots that there was an extra dimension to her in front

of a camera. It was certainly not a quality that had manifested itself when Jack had seen her on stage.

Jack had laughed at the suggestion that the camera had brought Karndess to life, but that was long, long ago. It did not matter whether she had been any good in it, for the film had failed and Verna had been forced to drift back into the round of deadly repertory productions. The whole experience had made her more bitter than ever and she would fly into violent rages, claiming her talent was not properly appreciated. She began to cause scenes in public places, to the torment of Ben, whose shy and easily embarrassed nature was well known to her. And this was not the worst of it. More and more frequently she would not return home, disappearing for days and even weeks at a time, usually with someone in show business whom she'd picked up at a party. Jack would never forget that awful night of torrential rain when Ben had turned up in an absolutely wretched state at three in the morning on Jack's doorstep. Ben had sat with him for hours, mournfully recounting Verna's succession of lovers; actors, producers, agents; anyone whom she thought might revive her flagging career. . . . He'd never really recovered when she had failed to return home.

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Just before two o'clock that afternoon Jack wandered over to the open window and looked out, resting his forearm on the hot frame. For a split second he felt a twinge of pain in his eyes as his pupils contracted to adjust to the brightness outside. Everything was so quiet and still; the street was deserted. Looking towards the end of the road he could see ripples of heat distorting the objects in the distance, their images buckled by the seemingly liquid air rising off the pavement and tarmac.

Through the shifting haze he saw a figure making its way towards the house, becoming ever more distinct as it approached. There was no doubt about who it was; only Ben Gibbs would be wearing a jumper in this heat. It was a relief to see that he did not look obviously insane, though his expression was alarming. He was furious.

Jack met him at the front door, followed Ben into the study, then went to retrieve cans of beer from the fridge. He returned from the kitchen reluctantly and for many minutes they drank in silence. Ben did not seem

inclined to relax. From time to time he ran his fingers through his hair, as he had the night that Verna had disappeared.

'Ben,' Jack spoke carefully, no longer able to contain his impatience. 'What's this all about? That stuff you wrote in the letter, I don't understand.'

'Tell me,' Ben insisted, 'do you ever watch old black and white movies and think about what you're seeing? Those dead actors and actresses playing the same parts over and over again? Aren't they a little like ghosts? Don't some people think that that's what ghosts are, images doomed to replay events, stuck in one place, haunting that place?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'No? Perhaps you don't.'

Jack said nothing. Ben continued:

'You remember that time I came to see you, to tell you about Verna and all those other men? I didn't know at the time that I'd never see her again.'

'I remember, Ben.'

'I seem to remember that you suggested that she might have left the country; gone to Hollywood in one last attempt at stardom, probably with her latest conquest?'

Jack nodded uncomfortably.

'It destroyed me,' Ben continued. 'I was so depressed. I drank too much, losing myself for weeks at a time. Even after I'd given up trying to find her, any mention of her caused me such pain . . .'

'I stuck by you. We're friends.'

'Ha!' he fairly spat at Jack, who cowered deep into his chair and fearfully took another sip of his drink.

'I've never got over her. I've plodded on in my ordinary life, never re-married. What a waste of a life.'

'I gave you as much support as I could.'

'And we never discussed Verna.'

'No.'

'Because we were friends? Because you knew how much it would hurt me?'

Jack was silent.

'You know I've been watching her in that film, *Black as Darkness*? When she appeared on the screen she began to talk to me. I don't know

whether the words on the soundtrack were the dialogue she was scripted to say, but I could see she was speaking directly to me. Now and again she even *looked* at me. There's hatred in her eyes, Jack.'

'Ben, this is all in your imagination.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Why would she hate you?'

'It's not *me*,' he laughed. 'It's *you* she hates.'

Jack cringed further back, his face full of fear and desperation. Ben studied him.

'Why? That's what I couldn't work out . . . at first. I've been watching it for days, trying to work it out.'

'Destroy the video. We'll get you some help . . .'

'Yesterday I smashed the television and tore the video to pieces. But it's too late. She's coming after you. She told me all about that night, Jack.'

Jack stared out into the brilliantly sunlit street outside, reluctant to look at his old friend. He didn't believe any of the rubbish about Verna speaking to Ben. But, somehow, Ben had found out what he'd done. He made himself look at the other man:

'You know what happened?'

'I do, but I want to hear it from you.'

Jack took a few moments to compose himself. In a way, he felt relieved.

'I've never been able to forget. You hammered on my door at three in the morning. How you didn't wake her I don't know. I'd got drunk and ended up in bed with her, or she had seduced me. I don't know . . .'

'But why? You were my friend. And you said you *hated* her!'

'I know, I know. The worst of it was that it was her very devilry, the thing that so repelled me, that drove me to it. It was a kind of black desire. I wanted to sink down into her pantherish embrace and be damned.'

'And . . .' Ben demanded.

'You talked about all the men she'd had, as she slept upstairs in my bed! I felt so bad that I resolved to put a stop to it. Once you'd left I went upstairs and flung her out. She was disbelieving, then enraged, and she flew at me. . . . I never saw her again. . . .'

'I told you, I know everything. She *told* me . . .'

'What did she tell you?' Jack asked, very slowly and deliberately.

'That you hit her, and told her that she had to leave me for good.'

‘Yes, I did.’ Jack was shaking with rage. ‘And did she tell you that she just grinned at me? She was going to tell you. ‘Oh no,’ she hissed, ‘I think he ought to know what his precious friend is like. Let’s see how he reacts when he finds out what a treacherous hypocrite you really are. How do you think he will feel when he finds out that both his wife and his best friend are heartless betrayers?’ ‘

‘Oh yes, she told me. You pushed her down the stairs.’

‘She was lying there, at the bottom, half-unconscious . . . she looked so quiet and peaceful . . . I strangled her.’

Jack Wells was shivering uncontrollably. He could not believe that he had managed to drag her still-warm, surprisingly heavy body into his car . . . had not known at first where he was going, or where he would hide her, but a sick inspiration had come and he had thought of the one place where no one would find it. A fresh grave in the cemetery, right on top of the coffin. It was perfect. After all, what better concealment for a leaf than in a forest? God, it had rained and rained . . .

Jack got up from the chair and walked unsteadily to the window. The sunlight still streaming into the room felt uncomfortably hot on his sweating face. He looked down the deserted street and into the heat haze in the distance.

A figure was making its way along the pavement towards the house.

Even in the hot air currents, its form did not waver. As it drew nearer, he saw that it was monochrome. She was dressed in a long raincoat and wet hair hung lankly across her lowered face. Her long white fingers twitched at her side. There was something all too familiar about the voluptuous shape and cat-like tread.

Jack grasped the window frame and his heart felt as if it had stopped beating.

She moved almost in slow motion, yet the rate of her advance seemed monstrously swift. When she reached the foot of the steps that led to the front door Jack could see the fiendish hate in her eyes. As she opened her mouth and soundlessly screamed there was a crackling in the background, like an old film soundtrack, mingled with the sound of whispering voices. And in the final moments just before she reached him, all the colour in the world seemed to drain away, as the rain began to fall.